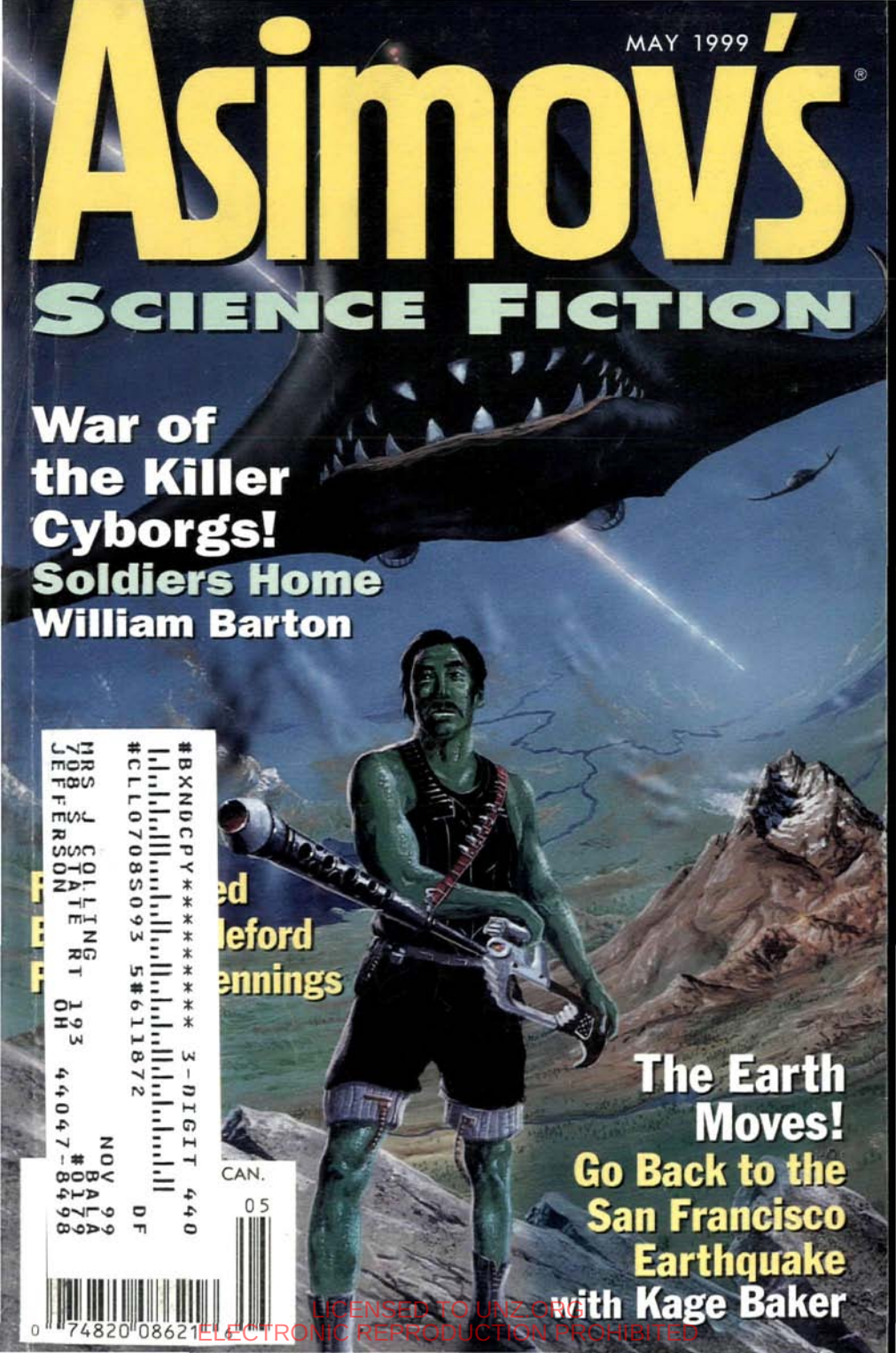

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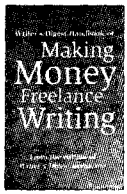

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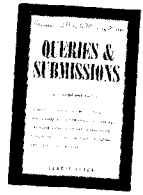

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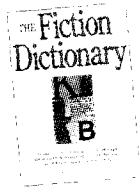

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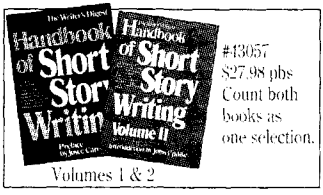

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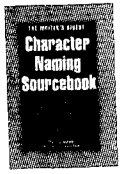

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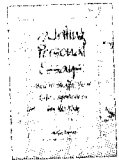

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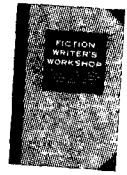

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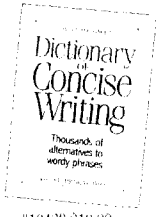

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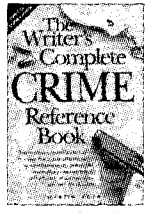

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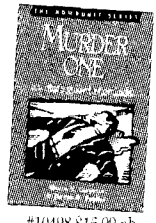

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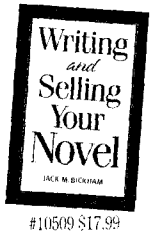

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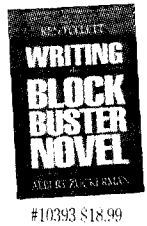

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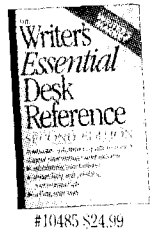

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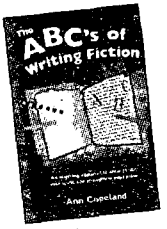

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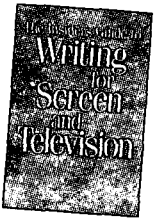

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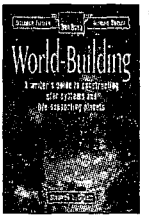

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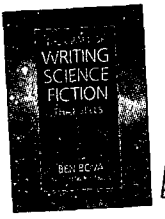

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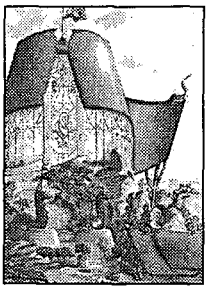

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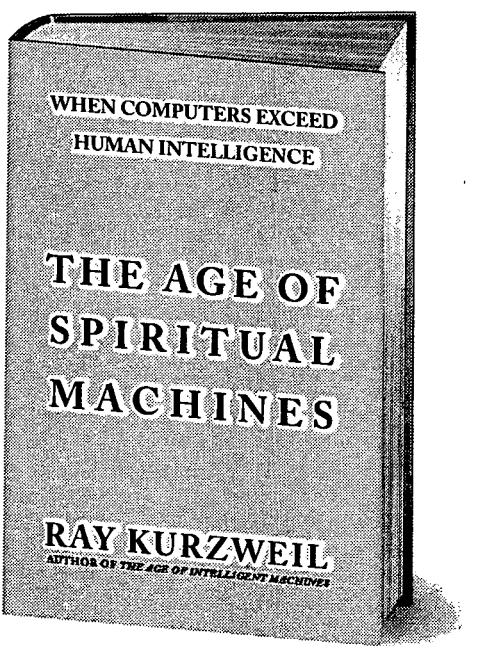
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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE BEST IS YET TO BE . . . RIGHT?

That a lot of science fiction is dystopian in theme is a statement that will not come as startling news to you. Whole libraries could be filled with works dedicated to the premise that the future is going to be an ugly, nasty, downright unpleasant place. Huxley's *Brave New World,* Orwell's *1984,* E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops," Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451,* Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange,* John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar,* Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* my own *The World Inside*—the list goes on and on, thousands and thousands of novels and stories designed to make you glad you're not going to live very far into the disagreeable decades to come.

And indeed there are days when it seems to me that those dark and dirty futures are already erupting into our present-day lives. Nastinesses great and small run rampant around us. Embassies blow up, thousands of innocent people are killed or injured, and fanatics gleefully take credit for the destruction in the name of their god. The people who live next door to us turn out to be murderers or fiends, dwelling in unimaginable squalor behind their suburban façade. Twenty or fifty or five hundred living species go into extinction every day; hideous new shopping malls spring up in pristine meadows; our rivers run black with muck or white with soapsuds. The kids wear baggy ugly clothes and funny metal things through their lips and noses and gun down teachers in the classrooms like so many clay pigeons. The things they do with our language are even worse than what they do with the weapons. What they speak is, like, only approximately English, and I'm, like, "Get me out of here!" when I hear them talking that way.

Yes, tackiness and venality abound wherever we turn. Most of our politicians are stupid and corrupt, except for the ones who are smart and corrupt; the President himself, as I write this, stands accused of a collection of offenses political and personal that would have had impeachment proceedings long since under way in any other era; but he sidesteps the charges, and his popularity ratings, so far, have not been seriously impaired. Then, too, our movies wallow in vulgarity and streams of amazingly realistic gore; the once noble game of baseball is polluted by retrogressive concepts like the designated hitter; everybody seems to be overweight; grown men wear baseball caps indoors and out. The stock market keeps doing crazy things. Black seems to be the universal color choice of people under thirty-five. The rich keep getting richer and the poor poorer. Folly and vanity and greed are triumphant everywhere. The ozone layer is vanishing and the polar ice-caps are going to melt any day now, flooding great swaths of the planet. And so on and so forth, ad infinitum ad nauseam.

We seem to be heading toward what I used to call the "Coming Attractions" future, after Fritz Leiber's famous 1950 short story, in which roving gangs of juvenile delinquents drive cars that bear fishhooks on them to skewer pedestrians, and women wear razor-sharp metal caps on their fingertips so that a caress

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will draw blood. (I wrote about the Leiber story in my April 1997 *Asimov's* column.) One might also think of it as the *Neuromancer* future, with a tip of the hat to William Gibson's gritty portrait of the cyberspace world, or as the *Blade Runner* future, taking the Ridley Scott film to stand for all of Philip K. Dick's dark fictional visions of the twenty-first century.

A terrible era, yes. The times are out of joint, as the poet said. The best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity, as the other poet said.

You nod solemnly. "And things will only get worse and worse!" you cry.

Maybe. And maybe not.

Having offered up this catalog of woes, let me now proffer a ray or two of unexpected sunshine.

Deploring the current sad state of civilization is, after all, nothing new. Indeed, philosophers and poets have been complaining about it almost since civilization began. "To whom do I speak today?" asked a bitter Egyptian of the Middle Kingdom, thirty-five hundred years ago. "Hearts are thievish. Every man seizes his neighbor's goods. There are no righteous. The land is left to those who do iniquity." Fifteen hundred years later, angry prophets like Jeremiah roared against the sins of the ancient Hebrews: "O Jerusalem, wash thine heart from wickedness, that thou mayest be saved. How long shall thy vain thoughts lodge within thee?" And the ferociously comic Latin poet Juvenal, writing not long after Nero's time, introduced his scathing catalog of the sins of Imperial Rome with the lines, "Vice hath attained its zenith! Then set sail, spread all thy canvas, Satire, to the gale!"

Well, yes, it's a sorry record of lying and cheating, of butchery and conquest, of vulgarity and foolishness. But why should it be anything else, really? This is, after all, only the dawn of history, and we are merely a

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bunch of smelly primitives. The Roman Empire was founded only two thousand years ago: a snap of the fingers, in the cosmic scheme of things. The venerable pyramids of Egypt are but a few thousand years older. Humanity had been on the planet a million years or so by the time the Pharaohs arrived on the scene: a million years of slow, uncertain groping toward such concepts as agriculture and settled village life. And even a million years: what's that in evolutionary terms? The dinosaurs were around at least fifty times as long.

It is, I think, an act of real arrogance to think of ourselves and our civilization as anything but rough first drafts, with the real flowering of the human race yet to come. Consider these words of the seventeenth-century French moralist Jean de La Bruyere, a savage critic of the society of his day:

"If the world is only to last a hundred million years, it is still in all its freshness, and has but just begun. . . . What new things will spring up in arts, in sciences, in nature, and, I venture to say, even in history, which are as yet unknown to us! What discoveries will be made! What various revolutions will happen in states and empires! What ignorance must be ours, and how slight is an experience of not above six or seven thousand years!"

Yes. *How slight is an experience of not above six or seven thousand years.* La Bruyere had no idea of the actual span of geological time, and yet his fundamental point remains valid: We are a new species. We have developed, in the astonishingly short period of a hundred centuries, a highly complex civilization. Our computers, our space satellites, our medical technology and our globe-spanning television broadcasts, our Shakespeares and our Bachs and our Michelangelos, set us apart from the apes from whom we sprang. But in the long view of evolutionary development we are still a lot closer to our anthropoid cousins in the jungle than we are to the superbeings we may very well become.

And, in fact, we seem still to be traveling in the right direction, despite all the lamentable things I decried in the opening paragraphs of this essay. Even in the short time we've been around we've managed considerable cleaning up of our act. We don't draw and quarter people in the public square any more. We don't—in most parts of the world—stone people to death for consorting with demons. We have abolished, essentially, such disagreeable things as smallpox and diphtheria. Maybe we still do think ugly things about people whose religions or skin colors are different from ours, maybe we are unduly devoted these days to watching nasty movies and wearing ugly clothes, but we need to remind ourselves that movies and clothes are things that no other species on Earth has ever managed to invent, and that if we can beat smallpox, how hard can it be to deal with the wearing of baseball caps in restaurants?

I suspect, then, that La Bruyere is right, that we have only just begun to make our mark, and that even though things *will* get worse before they get better, they'll get better eventually, and that the muddles of our present era are only a blip in the great saga of our race. To reinforce those thoughts I leave you with two final quotations. The first is from a favorite poem of Isaac Asimov's, Robert Browning's "Rabbi Ben Ezra":

"Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first
was made. . . ."

And the other is from that unforgettable vision of mankind's next few billion years, Olaf Stapledon's masterpiece of 1930, *Last and First Men,* in which an almost unthinkably evolved future descendant of ours, ad-

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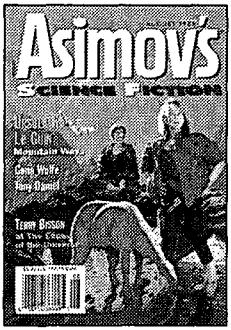

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dressing himself across time to our primitive era, is looking back across eons of colossal change as the inescapable extinction of mankind at last approaches. To him we are simple beings of the very dawn, and yet, viewing from its final days the whole long saga of human evolution, seeing that even the billions of years of human existence that lie in his past and our future are only the most momentary flicker in the infinite life of the cosmos, he urges us onward to the fulfillment of our destiny:

"You underestimate even the foothills that stand in front of you, and never suspect that far above them, hidden by cloud, rise precipices and snow-fields. The mental and spiritual advances which, in your day, mind in the solar system has still to attempt, are overwhelmingly more complex, more precarious and dangerous, than those which have already been achieved. And though in certain humble respects you have attained full development, the loftier potencies of the spirit in you have not yet even begun to put forth buds. . . .

"Man himself in his degree is eternally a beauty in the eternal form of things. It is very good to have been man. And so we may go forward together with laughter in our hearts, and peace, thankful for the past, and for our own courage. For we shall make after all a fair conclusion to this brief music that is man." ❍

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WRITING

Attack of the Mutant Readers

One of the things I like best about being a science fiction writer is that the readers pay attention. Not only do they pen fan letters and send email but they also care enough about stories to complain when the telling does not meet their standards. Now admittedly not all writers are comfortable with this scrutiny. Many, for instance, find the rough and tumble of the Usenet's **rec.arts.sf.written** newsgroup hazardous to their artistic health. But in my experience any reader who takes the trouble to react to what I write—even if that reaction is, shall we say, *pointed*—is a reader worth cultivating. One happy result of the enthusiasm of the SF readership is that occasionally someone will get so exercised over the perceived flaws of a story that she will utter those fateful words, "I can write better than *that*."

And sometimes she can.

It seems obvious that 99.9 percent of all science fiction writers begin as science fiction readers. However, although there are as many paths to the pages of *Asimov's* as there are contributors, it is rare indeed that anyone sells the first story she has ever written to Gardner and Sheila. Or the second. Or the eighth. Neither **Allen Steele** *(www.cybersecretary.com/allen)* nor **L. Timmel Duchamp** *(http://www.halcyon.com/ltimmel/)* was built in a day. The learning curve for writing science fiction is steep; many who begin the climb slip and fall away.

Being A Wannabe

It didn't take long to discover what worked for me back when I was trying to break into print. I learned to string sentences in writers' workshops. In a workshop, a group of writers gathers to offer critiques of works-in-progress. However, workshops can be dicey propositions, because their value depends entirely on the critical talents of the group. Alas, there is no predicting where useful criticism will come from. The wannabe Jim Kelly, who didn't know his apostrophe from a hole in the ground, was not typically a source of penetrating insight. On the other hand, I squirmed through workshops at which writers who were publishing when I was in diapers nattered incoherently about manuscripts they obviously did not understand. Yet workshops *did* and *do* succeed often enough for me that they are worth all the hassle. In fact, I've put almost every story I've ever published in *Asimov's* through one workshop or another.

For those with the time and money, there are three national workshops with impressive records for helping aspiring writers break into print. The original **Clarion Writers Workshop** *(http://pilot.msu.edu/~lbs/clarion/select.html)*, also known as Clarion East, is at Michigan State University, in East Lansing, Michigan. **Clarion West** *(http://www.sff.net/clarionwest/index.htm)* is held every year in beautiful Seattle, Washington. The

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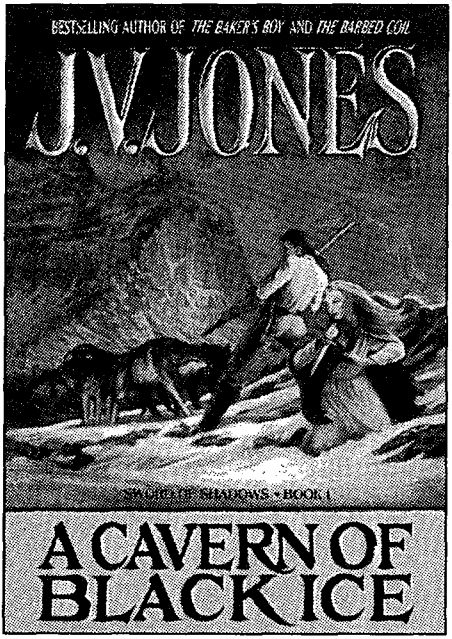

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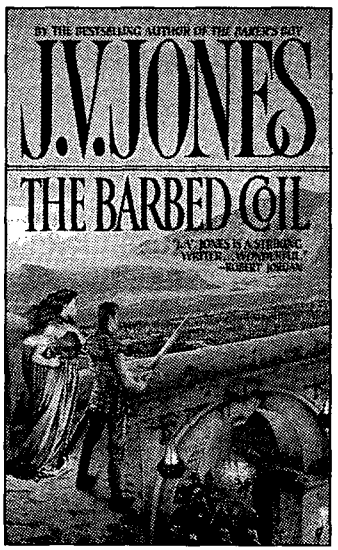

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newest of the three is **Odyssey** (*http://www.nhc.edu/odyssey/*) which is located at bucolic New Hampshire College in Manchester, New Hampshire.

Not everyone can make the major commitment these workshops require: six weeks of precious summer time and thousands of your hard-earned dollars. As is often the case, the net offers an alternative; there are a number of on-line workshops. Possibly the best known is the **Critters Workshop** (*http://brain-of-pooh.tech-soft.com/users/critters/*). Run by Andrew Burt, who, by all reports, is one of the world's true mensches, Critters is well-organized and free. Members submit stories and critiques by email. For the right to submit manuscripts monthly, members are required to write a critique each week. Most pieces get 15-20 critiques. Critters is huge, with several hundred participants ranging from the dewiest of wannabes to award-winning members of the Science Fiction Writers of America. Critters also accepts novels for critique, which is commendable since most workshops handle the long form badly, if at all. While I am not myself a Critter, I have consulted inside sources who tell me that the criticism ranges from asinine to astute. So pay no attention to the donkeys! If I were shopping for a workshop, I'd give Critters a close look.

Speaking of the **Science Fiction Writers of America** (*http://www.sfwa.org*), one of the best science fiction sites on the web is SFWA's. Under the capable direction of Webmaster Melisa Michaels, a team of professional science fiction writers has made this a showcase for the organization. There are several books worth of how-to articles for writers of all levels of accomplishment and many useful links, including a directory of just about every SF writer on the web. Click over to the ergonomics section to find out what you might be doing to yourself sitting in front of a computer all day—oh, my aching wrists! Of particular interest is the ongoing effort to keep science fiction from losing its memory: members have recommended reading lists of the masterpieces of the past. And if you want to keep up with the latest and greatest, check out the list of Nebula recommended stories available for free downloading.

How Not To

Here are a couple of sites that writers and readers will visit at their peril; they reveal the crimes of SF.

My first encounter with the Evil Overlord came in a forwarded email from my writer pal **Greg Frost** (*http://www.op.net/~bgfrost/*). Greg fills my emailbox with humor forwards on a regular basis; if he didn't exist, I'd have to invent him. I thought the Evil Overlord's resolutions were so funny that I forwarded them on to some of my own nearest and dearest. Then the other day I discovered that there was an entire Evil Overlord site! **The Evil Overlord List** (*http://www.eviloverlord.com/*) is the work of one Peter Anspach and his sinister cohorts. According to the site: "Being an Evil Overlord seems to be a good career choice. It pays well, there are all sorts of perks and you can set your own hours. However every Evil Overlord I've read about in books or seen in movies invariably gets overthrown and destroyed in the end." But is this an occupational hazard of Evil Overlordship, or a comment on the feeble intellects of folks who are drawn to this line of work? Overlord Wannabe Anspach attempts to offer an answer with "The Top 100 Things I'd Do If I Ever Became An Evil Overlord." Here's a sampler:

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2. My ventilation ducts will be too small to crawl through.

16. I will never utter the sentence "But before I kill you, there's just one thing I want to know."

50. My main computers will have their own special operating system that will be completely incompatible with standard IBM and Macintosh powerbooks.

74. When I create a multimedia presentation of my plan designed so that my five-year-old advisor can easily understand the details, I will not label the disk "Project Overlord" and leave it lying on top of my desk.

82. I will not shoot at any of my enemies if they are standing in front of the crucial support beam to a heavy, dangerous, unbalanced structure.

100. Finally, to keep my subjects permanently locked in a mindless trance, I will provide each of them with free unlimited Internet access.

It occurs to me that if only Darth Vader had clicked over to the Evil Overlord site, we'd all be dancing under the shadow of the Death Star.

John Van Sickle, according to his web page, "is a technical sergeant in the United States Air Force . . . who works in the Pentagon, busily maintaining the freezer where the alien bodies are kept." John is himself an aspiring writer and has posted some of his as-yet unpublished work on his site. But the gems of **John's Science Fiction Pages** *(http://www.erols.com/vansickl/scifi.htm)* show him to be clearly under the sway of the Evil Overlord. Consider, for example, his "The Things I Will Do if I Am Ever the Sidekick" or "The Survival Guide for Innocent Bystanders." My favorite was "The Grand List of Overused Science Fiction Clichés." John evaluates each cliché on his extensive list for its sexism, bigotry, stupidity, sterility, and appearance in any of the various incarnations of *Star Trek*. He has certainly punched some of my hot buttons. For instance: "Heroes who are so emotionally stunted that they don't care about close friends/relatives that die as long as they complete some mission" or "Beings of pure energy" or "A society in which everyone is required to die on his or her *N*th birthday" or "The availability of firearms notwithstanding, sword fighting returns as a significant method of combat" or "Super-intelligent computers that blow up when the hero confuses them" or "Space vessels that lack fuses, circuit breakers, and surge suppressors, so that the control panels explode when some distant portion of the ship is damaged." And he cites the one cliché that has caused me to hurl more books across my living room than any other: "Lots of apostrophes packed into alien words and phrases for no apparent reason." While John's Grand Cliché List is not quite as funny as the Evil Overlord's, it is more thought-provoking. Surfing though it, I could not help but remember all of the stories and TV shows and movies that have irked me over the years. And then I got to worrying about which of his clichés *I* had abused.

How To

So if one goal of good writing is to avoid clichés, just where do we go for fresh SF ideas? **Harlan Ellison** *(http://www.menagerie.net/ellison/ellihome.htm)* used to rave about this place in Schenectady—never mind, it's an old joke. But hey, maybe you've heard of this little enterprise humanity has cooked up? It's called *science*. The folks who do it break new ground almost every day. Astute reader Rosemary C. Smith of Arlington, Virginia suggests that one place to start on a science tour of the web is the **Popular**

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Science Best of the Web Page (*http://www.popsci.com/context/features/bow/*). This is a link page to fifty of what Popular Science magazine thinks are the best science websites. While others may have chosen differently, these are all fascinating and well-designed sites. I haven't quite finished visiting all of them, but here's a quick look at some of my faves so far.

Science for the Millennium (*http://www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/Cyberia/Expo/*) is brought to us by the National Center for Supercomputing Applications. It's supposed to be a kind of an online World's Fair, complete with a map and pavilions, which extols the wonders made possible by bleeding edge computing. At times the conceit threatened to throttle my modem; all the gorgeous multimedia makes this a painfully slow experience at 56K. But there are work-arounds and the information on astrophysics, metacomputing, and virtual reality is well-presented.

There is also plenty of astrophysics at **Virtual Trips to Black Holes and Neutron Stars** (*http://antwrpgsfcnasa.gov/htmltest/rjn_bht.html*), the brainchild of Robert Nemiroff at Michigan Technological University. The title says it all here, hard science fans; this site is crammed with MPEG simulations of where no one has gone before—or is likely to go any time soon. Like Science for the Millennium, this site brought my system to a crawl, but it was worth the wait. "A stimulating, relativistically accurate trip!" blurbs Kip Thorne, Feynman Professor at Cal Tech and one of my science heroes.

Pitsco's Ask an Expert (*http://www.askanexpert.com/askanexpert/index.shtml*) might well be what the net was invented for. It's a link and email list of experts who are willing to answer questions from anyone *free of charge*. What a concept! They do ask that users consult the web pages before emailing the experts on the theory that the easiest questions may well be answered there. The list is boggling; they've got experts on birds, engineering, gravity, hinges, mopeds, paint, roses and spectrometry, to name but a few. Ask away!

Exit

Excuse me if this is opening a can of worms, but I believe that the quality of both the fiction and the science in SF has improved dramatically over the years. I'll be happy to compare the stories in this issue with the May 1939 issue of, well, *anything*. Which is certainly not to say this is as good as it gets. What readers demand, writers will try to deliver. Just don't ask me to name one of my aliens M'dre'se'th! ○

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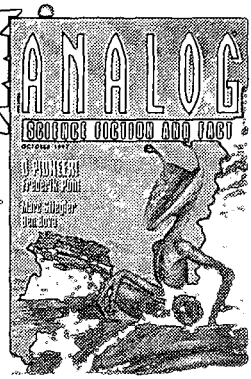

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William Barton

SOLDIERS HOME

William Barton's last tale for us was the stunning December 1998 cover story, "Down in the Dark." In his riveting new tale, he returns to our pages to once again wreak havoc with humanity. "Soldiers Home" is set in the same universe as Mr. Barton's latest novel, *When We Were Real*, which is just out from Warner Aspect.

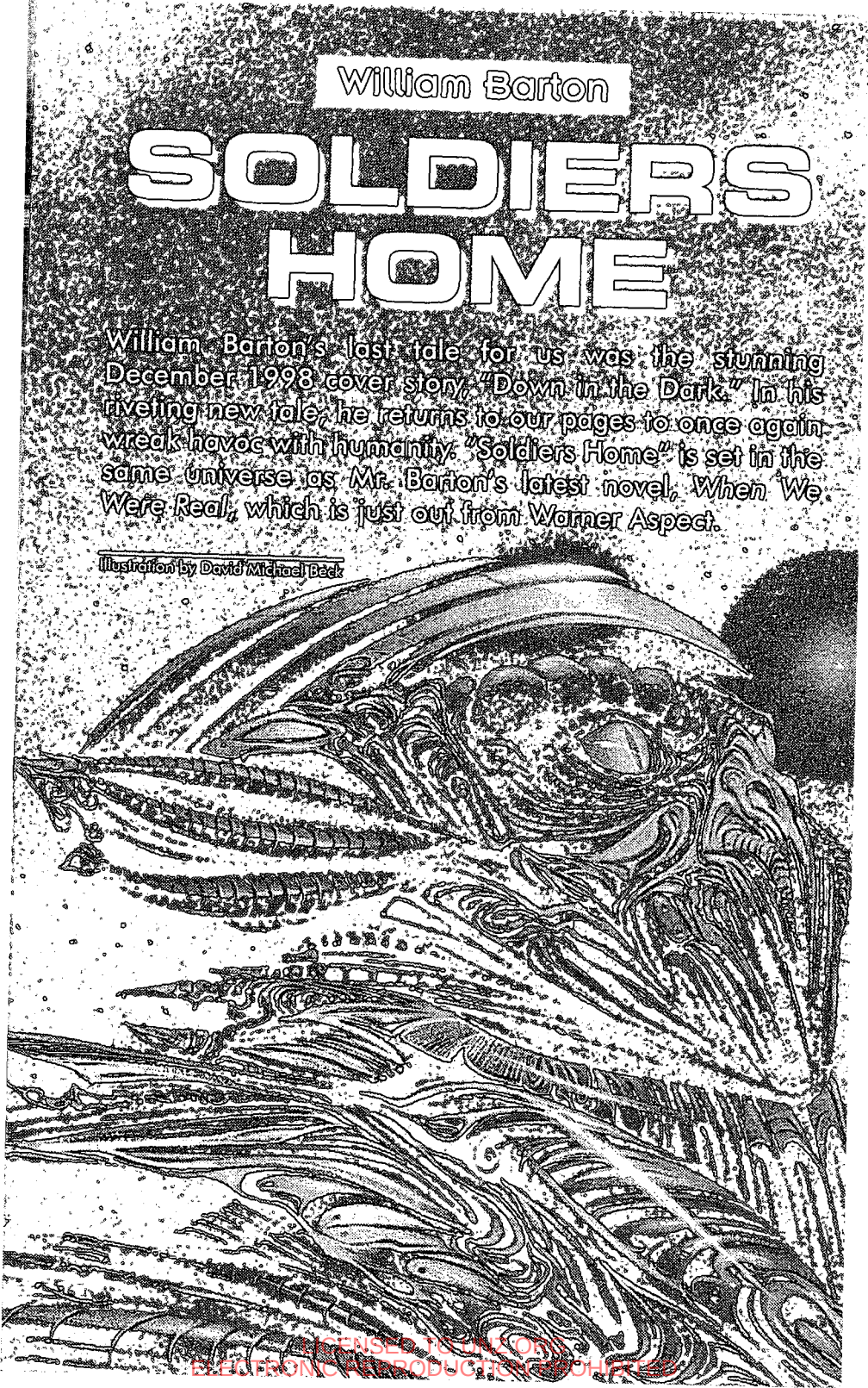

Illustration by David Michael Beck

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The stars belong to no one.

They lie against the empty black in drifted clots and jagged heaps of meaningless white light. Nothing to pin your hopes on, just brilliant dots strewn at random across the void, an empty stage where we live and die, and nothing more.

I stood on the lip of a gaped-open docking platform, toes of my boots hanging over the abyss, watching the taxi back away from the ruined habitat I'd chosen, hard vacuum freezing cold in my eyes, crisp nothingness on my skin. The taxi was already no more than a black splotch against the stars, visible only by the intermittent red twinkle of thrusters and the pale, tenuous blue exhaust of its field modulus device.

It grew small against the sky before turning away, ghostlight covering its outline, hesitated for an instant, then vacated its place among the stars, though I could still hear the pilot superimposed over the datawarren chatter in my head. I dropped his channel, then pushed away the rest, dropping it outside my shield, standing still, in utter silence.

With the taxi gone, the stars seemed remote. Unreal.

They used to mean so much to me, those faraway stars. What happened to the boy who would stand alone on a midnight hillside, warm wind curling round him, looking up at this same clutter of stars, imagining himself out among them? Gone, I suppose. Erased along with the hillside, with the world on which it sat, gone with all the people who lived there, ground away to ashes and dust. Gone to nothing along with so much else, until I sometimes imagine only I remain.

Foolishness.

The taxi pilot, a Spinfellow who'd looked to me like nothing so much as an old brass bed frame collapsed against the ship's control nexus in a shambles of broken coil springs, had been some kind of a soldier in the war, though clearly not the same kind as me. A pilot, I guess, killing clean and cold.

Hard to tell with something so utterly alien as a Spinfellow, agrammatical voice chattering in my head like the screeching bedsprings of a remote, manic fuck, but he'd seemed almost sorry about the way his people had used mine to break the age-old deadlock of a war that went on and on. Sorry, but it's what you get, showing up at just the right moment, humanity at the bloated endstage of an expanding-shell culture, just when cannon fodder was needed most.

Not so many of us now, hm?

I'd tried to accommodate his wish to talk, telling about all the wonderful battles I'd seen, all the Starfish I'd killed, but kept falling silent, going away. Finally he gave up, glad to abandon me here on the edge of the void with my pitiful pile of junk.

It's funny how what I remember most now is just waking up at a repair station, glitter-eyed unmod nurse bending over me, seeing me awake. "Welcome back, Mr. Ashe."

Welcome the hell back.

Your squadmates? No, sorry, you were the only one who made it.

I didn't find out 'til much later that the Starfish had found our little corner of space, had come in and cleaned out humanity's clustered homeworlds, hoping to stem the tide of cannon fodder and turn back a sudden, improbable Spinfellow victory.

Remembered battles? No. They all smear together now, as if there were only one, full of fire and pain, very little of it my own.

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As I stood still, looking at nothing, I could see the stars turn, counter to the habitat's slow spin, rising up from below my feet, crossing straight up, disappearing somewhere behind me. No sun. No other light. This had been an interstellar depot out on the edge of what'd once been human space, seven light-years from the nearest star system, abandoned now for centuries, its running lights gone dark.

I'd seen these sorts of things before. Knew what I'd find inside.

Knew what I hoped to find.

Finally, stars grown stale as everything else, I picked up my gear and turned away, facing the dark habitat, letting my eyes see infrared so I could locate the door.

There.

Might as well go on in.

From the heights of the endcap mountains of an old-style cylindrical habitat, even under the bright midday glare of full stemshine illumination, you can see details almost five hundred kilometers away, tall structures like mountains peeking out of the haze, floating like dull purple ghosts behind Rayleigh-scattering sky.

This had been a big residential-industrial complex, one of the biggest they made in the old days, out on the expanding frontier, when humanity was mighty and young, giant freighters pushing lightspeed as they plied the void between the suns, bold explorers plumbing the remotest deep, in our thousand years as a starfaring species pushing hundreds of light-years in all directions away from old Earth.

I could feel the stemshine's light prickling on my skin, turning me green wherever it touched. I pulled off my tunic and dropped it on top of the backpack, pack sucking it in, tucking it away, and watched the fuzz of downy hair on my chest turn from coal black to spun gold, pallid skin underneath suffusing briefly pink, then pale spring green, slowly darkening.

Organelles. Cellular well-being. As if God were in his Heaven and everything right with this world, any world, even with my world.

I can picture what the habitat must have been like before the war, back when I was a boy. It was in this sector of the frontier that First Contact came, and how excited they must have been, receiving news that one of our explorer fleets had stumbled on the wreck of an alien starship.

Imagine the scene. That ruined ship, complete with survivors, sprawled on the surface of an inhospitable world. And those lovely, grateful aliens, little beings like turquoise wolves, with spindly arms where their ears should be and great, golden, many-faceted eyes, bursting through a tissue-thin communication barrier with their superior data-processing capability, then carefully explaining that their ship, once repaired, could go faster than light, and would we be interested in the technology?

I remember how excited my father was when the news came through the datawarren. Yes, we'd fix their ship, help them go home, and then the stars would be ours, more stars than ever populated any of our dreams.

Down in the lowlands, landscape curving up to right and left, stretching out straightaway into the mist ahead as far as the eye could see, disappearing in blue, there were clouds, white and gray, and green jungle, blotched with the shadows of those clouds, patches of fog, the twisted lightning bolts of artistically laid-out rivers, sandhills, dune fields, red rock canyons, and the dark, misty crags of faraway mountains.

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At the end of the world, so remote its foothills were lost in the mist, one mountain seemed to have a pennon of snow blowing from its peak.

When I was a boy, living on the skin of a eutropic habitat, with its down-curving horizon like a natural world cast in miniature, we had mountains like that. Exactly like that, modeled, I'm sure, on the same original.

That was the world where I lived, still growing up, when the first Spinfellow scoutship nosed into human space, long before we managed to fix the refugees' ship, before we even understood they *were* refugees, or what they were running from.

Straight down, looking down the sheer crags of the endcap mountains, a tiny dot circled, rising and falling on the thermals. Probably as high as it can go, air thinning out after only a few dozen kilometers. And big, whatever it was, visible without magnification from so far away. Do I want to see it? No, though it might be just what I'm looking for.

I shouldered my pack, picked up the rest of my gear in one hand, turned, and started walking, clockwise, in the direction of spin, looking for the elevator down. It would be broken, most likely, but I knew I could jump down the shaft, slowing myself as necessary by squeezing the railguide.

Sooner or later, I'll get where I'm going.

No hurry.

No God-damned hurry at all.

From down on one of its floor panels, a cylinder habitat's not that different from a natural world. To be sure, the world rises around you like an English saddle, but you might be in a big valley, after all, and . . . well. A human being's like a bug in the grass, more concerned with his own little space than the grandeur beyond.

I got out my gun and assembled it, rearranged my pack, tucking other gear in to take its place, took a long look up into brilliant blue heaven, shimmery stemshine hanging like a bar of molten gold trying to hide behind the sky, then set off down the game trail.

There were patches of forest separated by broad, grassy fields, fields dotted by thousands of little yellow flowers. Here and there were odd piles of ruin, things that looked a little bit like collapsed buildings and broken-down bulldozers, crawled all over by red strangler vine.

I wonder how long it took to get like this?

How long did it take for the trees in the parks to realize they were free, free to seed the winds, be fruitful, multiply, and cover their world? How long before the grassy walkways jumped their fences or tunneled underneath the way *gramineae* will, taking over every space in sight? What job did the strangler vines have, back when they were slaves?

I wonder how long it took this world to grow so beautiful.

Something tiny and black arrowed toward me, arrowing out of the misty blue sky, circling my head, round and round, fluttering like a bat lost in daylight.

It screamed something, wordlike, shrill, laughing, hysterical, laughing at me, cartoon creature imposed on an Impressionist's overwrought landscape, then banked away, soaring between two copses of tall, thin, swaying brown trees, up, up, gone.

From far away, far in the same direction, there came a brief *rat-a-tat-tat,* like someone imitating machine-gun fire on a child's tin drum.

I stood still, not really waiting for it to come back and talk to me, breath-

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ing in the scent of a broken-down world. Here was the turpentine smell of old pine trees. There the fresh stink of new-mown hay. Behind both, almost hidden, a soft, alluring tang of half-burnt silicone lubricant.

Used to smell that a lot, when we worked with the tank companies. A reassuring smell. Infantrymen and tanks. The smell of history. I can see them now, down all the centuries, marching together into the guns.

Beyond the trees there was a boulder field, uptilted rock hiding the forward horizon. Not that you'd call it that, landscape just going on and on until it faded away, fading into the sky. I found a way up, hopping from stone to stone, and . . .

The thing reared in front of me just as I crested the highest rock, casting a giant's shadow. Thing like a dinosaur, I guess you'd say. Red eyes and scaly skin, blotched and freckled with a thousand metallic tints. Clutching hands and broad, toothy jaws.

Silver teeth like so many triangles, one just like the next, shining in the stemlight, dripping pale yellow oil like saliva.

Red eyes looking down at me.

Seeing me.

Knowing me for what I am?

I'd heard this place had been used for a military hardware dump, not long before the end of the war, just for throwing things away, useless things that were too hard to destroy.

Things you wouldn't want to bring home with you.

Especially if you still imagined you had a home.

So what would this be, with its red eyes rolling, hungry jaws opening and closing like that?

I remembered a construction battalion I'd run across once.

Yeah. Maybe one of those things.

I thumbed the charge button on my gun and listened to the condenser whine.

There! That caught its attention.

Put the gun to my shoulder and looked through the sight.

The green light winked once. *Ready.*

We stood still, two old war machines, locked in one last tableau.

Red eyes looking at me, waiting.

Oh, God.

Red eyes full of fear.

I lowered the gun and looked up at the thing, smelling its hot oil breath, breath like summer sunshine.

I thumbed the détente button, feeling the gun's charge dissipate.

Go ahead then.

Red eyes staring down at me.

For Christ's sake.

Just a digging machine, that's all.

It turned and scrambled away, claws crackling in the dirt, kicking up a sandstorm that obscured half the sky, kicking up boulders the size of cars as it fled, boulders bounding around, crashing down on my pile of rocks, boulders exploding, splinters flying.

None of them managed to crash down on me.

Not that it would have done any good.

After a while, I shouldered the gun, hanging it from the strap, and walked on, emptying myself of useless feeling.

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* * *

Toward the end of a long afternoon, twilight's first glimmer signaled by the stemshine's gold taking on a sullen, brassy hue, I found the valley of my dreams, gentle vale dropping down from the endless plains, slim indigo river winding across a hilly lowland, dotted with clusters of trees in the lesser vales between, valley opening on a northward vista, landscape fading out in blue as always.

I picked a campsite at the crest of a low hill, close by the side of the river, hill caught in a little oxbow bend, dropped my pack, and watched the tent erect itself, supports walking like insect limbs, shell slithering into place, stakes screwing themselves deep in the dirt.

There was a soft breeze blowing down the valley, taking me from behind, warm on my bare skin, skin made a rich, blackening green by the long day's ultraviolet blaze, gust of wind tossing my hair, then running away down the valley and away, marking its passage through waves of grass.

Distant buzzing.

I turned toward the sound, and there was a tiny biplane dipping over the landscape, up and down, back up again, wings painted white, flashing in stemlight, a red stripe here, another one there, swooping low over pale splotches in clustered bits of forest, dusting them with a transparent gray nutrient cloud.

Like a living thing.

Living and wise.

Soft buzzing like a faraway insect.

I opened my scanner array and listened for him over the sudden roar of the datawarren. There. Discordant robot chatter, no one talking to no one listening, remarks addressed to the ghosts of long-erased controllers.

Snap.

Silence again.

Fading buzz of a toylike engine.

Nearby chitter of something small. A clatter of little tin gears.

I went down to the riverside, knelt on crunchy gravel, thrust my head into the deep blue water and drank. A hint of metallic salt. The strong flavor of gasoline, gasoline cooked up from old cometary CHON, leaking from something dead, way upstream.

I opened my eyes under water, shifting my visual peak away from green, on toward blue, and watched shadows materialize out of the murk. There, there, and there. Sleek shapes, not so much like fish, but close enough.

Who knows what they might originally have been for?

Holding position against the sluggish current with their lazily turning propellers.

I stood, cold water streaming down my chest and back, soaking into the waist of my pants, walked back up onto the hill, and rummaged in the pack. Cookstove? Well, maybe later. Get it out, anyway. I found the case with my fishing gear, tucked it under my arm and walked down to the river, started walking upstream aways, water bubbling softly on my right, looking out at the rocks and eddies.

Cluster of roots over there. Lots of shadows under water.

Some flat land there where the soil had washed away, covered up with water now, forming something like a swamp in among the trees. Farther in, some of the trees had been gnawed around the base by something that must imagine it could play at being a beaver. Maybe if I looked long

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enough, I might find a dam and pond, pond on its way to becoming a meadow.

That'd be nice.

There was a cloud of . . . I don't know, call them midges, little black dots rising and falling over the swamp. Microscopic vision, quickly tuned, showed me a glint of chromium steel, little blue glass eyes, the transparent blur of tiny silvery wings.

It's so God-damned pretty here.

After a while, as the sky slowly turned from brass to lustrous red-gold, I found a big, flat black rock sticking out into the river, rock warm as a dying griddle from day-long stemlight. Water was flowing around the rock, humped up into a long, arcing bowshock, curve broken farther out by a string of rounded boulders.

I put the case down and opened it up, pulling out rod and reel, unfolding it, snapping everything into place, stood again and played its preylight out over the river. There. Things clustered beyond the rocks, floating in quiet lee water. Some bigger fish, if that's what you want to call them, deep down, over by the far bank.

I put my thumb on the bait button and slid one finger through the flycaster's trigger guard. Made my fisherman's stance and stood still, not quite taking aim.

Overhead, the sky was turning to muddy orange, stemshine a broad, hazy band of crimson, sky around it stained pale brown. Nothing else. No clouds. No . . .

High, high up, a silent vee of black dots, drifting along.

My eyes zoomed in, uninvited, showing me the shape of each black dot.

Balloonsailers, half black shark, half dirigible, half jet engine, soaring through the sky, each one twenty meters from stem to stern. See their gaping mouths, the dark, serrated shapes of matte-gray beryllocerамic teeth? See the glimmer of their silver eyes?

If I listened carefully, I could hear the intermittent mutter of their engines, driving them against the wind.

Their fins twisted and the vee arced, turning away, sinking deep in the dull mist of nightfall.

What if they'd seen me?

Was I ready?

Don't know.

I looked back down, at the flycasting rod in my hands, line unfired, baits unmounted, looked out across the now black water, water picking orange-and-red highlights from the sky.

In there somewhere, the fish surrogates were waiting, undead.

I sat down, laying the rod gently by my side, lay back on the warm surface of the rock, warm stone like blood against my skin, cradled the back of my head in one palm, and looked up into the sky, watching it darken.

Soon, I thought, the stars will come out.

Surely they made this place have a night full of stars.

I remember once, on leave, how some of us went spearfishing in a zero-gee habitat we'd found. Not a human habitat. Not human at all. No, this was far from the homes we knew, deep in what had once been Starfish territory, now in Spinfellow hands, thanks in no small measure to us.

It was a wonderful place, a great big bag of a world, full of thick, sweet air, floating globule ponds, seas made entirely of mist.

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We swam among them, jetting stretches of air with our backpacks, exploring airy tangles of seaweed jungle. Diving deep in great, clear, undulating amoebas of water.

I don't know where we found the spearguns.

I remember we had fun, shooting those silvery things, things that screamed as they died, even under water. Killing them, cutting them up, cooking them, eating them.

Someone said they heard these things were the inhabitants of this sector, beings who'd once had a star-spanning empire of their own, but by then it didn't matter. Sentient or not, they tasted damned good, though our Spin-fellow-supplied systemic symbionts insisted we could get no nutrition from them at all.

Something about levorotation.

I remember floating with my friends in a misty blue-green sky, eating long, thin, silvery people, smacking my lips over their flavor, joking with my friends, and remembering how my father and I used to fish together, when I was a boy.

It wasn't like that at all.

More like this, with gear just like this, he and I standing hip-deep in swift, oily brown water, holding our fancy flycasters . . . I remember how serious my father's eyes would get, as we fished away one long morning after another, one of my mother's silvergirl servants standing on the shore, watching us, shanghaied from household chores to carry our gear and cook whatever lunch we caught.

At some point, while I lay on my stone, remembering these things, the sky grew black overhead and the stars came out, stars shining between broad, featureless panels of black, light streaming in from the galaxy beyond.

They were the same stars after all, refusing to change for me.

Finally, I went on up to bed, crawling into the empty blackness of the tent.

In the morning, I stood on my hilltop beneath a cold cobalt dawn, blue sky striated with a barely visible herringbone pattern, streamers of dusty light from a dark, golden stemshine.

That way, the light seemed to say.

It's over there.

I stretched, feeling wonderful in some insensate way. Splendid animal health, a sense of meaningless being.

Down below, the stream was a sinuous rille of molten metal, reflecting a perfect mixture of sky light, chuckle of moving water blending promiscuously with the soft, whispering wind.

They write poems about this stuff.

When I turned away from the river, there in the distance, hanging in blue space, rising out of the mist, was the far-away mountain, streamer of snow blowing from its peak, stilled by distance, like a motionless white flag.

After a while, I knelt and opened my pack, rummaging around until I found the ballonet gun in its compact case. I opened it up on the hillside by the tent and began going through an assembly routine I could do not only with my eyes shut, not only in my sleep, but perhaps even if I were dead.

Barrel. Condenser. Stock. Arming mechanism. Power source.

I twisted it together, one part following another in magically perfect suc-

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cession, made the last connection, everything together just so, and felt it grow ever so slightly warm to the touch.

Hefted it.

Looked through the sight.

Armed my weapon and switched off the safeties, listening to the condenser whine.

The ready light blinked green.

Yes. Yes, I remember.

I remember how we used to worry about how warm it got, giving us away in combat, compromising our stealth. But this wasn't a sniper gun. No. More like a portable artillery piece.

I thumbed the détente button and felt it grow still in my hands, engaged the safeties and slung it over my shoulder, hanging by an indestructible gray strap, not quite a mass of insensible plastic, still warm to the touch. Still alive as I stood looking at my faraway mountain with its beckoning white flag.

Time to go.

It was cold on the mountain.

I could sense the cold, though I can never *be* cold. Ice and snow? Nothing. Not when you've had vacuum on your skin, when you've stood in the void between the stars, on some forgotten chunk of ice, stood on the brink of absolute zero, waiting for the fire.

But I could know the cold.

This cold now.

Could remember what cold had been.

It took me the better part of a day and a night to walk to the mountain, human exhaustion and hunger discarded as luxuries, feeling like a strong mechanical man, walking and walking, over the plains, up the foothills to steeper slopes, then climbing, ballonet gun slung across my back.

After a while, the slopes turned to bare, gray, vertical rock, my fingers digging in like pitons. *Crack.* Stone giving way to flesh.

Once, I slipped, sliding on my back across a scree-slick slope, shooting over a knife's edge, out into space, twisting in the air, reaching out, catching myself in a spalled-open crevice, hand wedging in with just the tiniest flicker of pain, body flailing above the void, slapping hard against the cliff-face with a sound like a wet rag, hanging on, dangling, feet down over some howling abyss, listening to the wind, wondering what it would be like.

Maybe a thousand meters to the snowfield below, this one handhold the last one I could possibly have reached.

I could see myself tumbling, end over end, all the long way down, eyes closed so I wouldn't see the ground reach out for me.

Would that have been enough?

No way to know.

Just a fantasy, compounded of remembered fears.

In a more real world, this one perhaps, I would've picked myself up from a man-shaped hole in the snow, grimacing at my carelessness, checked to make sure the gun was all right, would've begun the long climb all over again.

After a while, I lifted myself back over the ledge, unwedged my hand, shook out its little cramp, and went on, climbing a bit more carefully. Only a bit. No hurry. No hurry at all.

You'll get there soon enough, Mr. Ashe.

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* * *

High up, up above the clouds, the mountain leveled out, and I walked along a knife-edged ridge of tight-packed snow toward the final peak. The sky was a remote, brilliant blue here, silver-blue, like cold steel, the world spread out below like the inside of a pipe, stemshine stretching out this way and that to infinity above, painful white light hiding the world beyond.

I stopped, looking at nothing, my breath like a plume of frost, each breath ending in a cloud of tiny snowflakes.

Wasteful, that.

I set a timer on the heat exchangers in my nose and throat, starting and stopping bloodflow as I inhaled and exhaled. There. Better. I could do without the oxygen, of course, but wanted it nonetheless.

World like a painting.

Like some cheap, mass-produced art.

How many worlds like this did we make before that old human universe came to an end? Millions, perhaps?

How many of them now remain?

Only a few.

Junk art resting on the rubbish heap, waiting for the bulldozer to come.

That old world seemed so limitless. Limitless, and I could hardly wait to grow up, to get out *into* it, get away from my circumscribed childhood, out into the infinite black deep between the stars.

Do I remember when it ended?

Maybe so.

I remember a day long ago, a day floating isolated in my past, so separated from the rest I have no way of knowing who or what I was back then. My sister and I had one of the household silvergirls up in a seldom-visited part of the attic that day, so I suppose we'd gotten old enough to be a little on the naughty side, making it practice kissing with us.

I remember my sister giggling as I carefully pushed my tongue between its cold lips, trying to look like a character in a drama, silent silvergirl snatched from household chores, trying its best to give me what I wanted.

Maybe we had a datanode up there with us, calling in music from the household net, making the silvergirl dance with us. I remember there was a party coming up, that we'd wanted to look oh-so-sophisticated for our friends.

Nodes are real smart, are supposed to figure out what's important, tell you what you need to know, not just what you want. This one suddenly dropped the music, projected imagery into the attic's air, my sister going, "*Huh* . . ." Surprise in her voice.

The silvergirl pulled away from me, hand on my chest, turning to look just as I did.

There was a mountain, just like this one, under a stark violet sky with two pale blue suns, a snowy ridge just like this one, alien starship strewn in pieces down a long, white slope.

Human ships hovering overhead.

Then a tight closeup, showing us those alien crewmen standing in the snow, watching us come in for a landing.

I looked at the silvergirl first. Nothing in its empty silver eyes, but . . . the silvergirl was looking at me. Waiting. As if it knew something I didn't. We sent it down the service chute, back on duty, then went on down ourselves, knowing Dad would be digging for data.

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Looking back, I feel that I knew what was coming, impossible foreknowledge implanted in memory because I lived through everything that came afterward.

So I remember fear as well as breathless excitement.

And when we found out about the great war, I remember how proud we were at being invited to take part.

Not far from the top of the peak, up above the source of the snowy plume, I found a little hollow where I could rest, scanning the sky, sheltered from the wind, looking round at the world's brilliant vistas. From here, the snow was no more than mist, a transparent mist stretching away into the sky, hiding nothing.

I stood still, looking upward, my frequency sensitivities roving however they would. The sky grew bright, then dark, shadows emerging from beyond the blue. Faraway places, faraway things.

Beyond the stemshine, I knew, lay only more world, world beyond the sky just exactly like this, going round and round without end or beginning. Not really a world at all. Merely an artifact, like a silvergirl, or a gun.

Hanging strung between crags nearby was something like an orb spider's web, frost glistening on its strands, something like a spider hanging there, stemlight glinting from shiny metal limbs, picking out colored metal eyes.

Every now and again, it would whisper to itself, or perhaps to me, whispering in something that sounded like an unknown language, a soft, suggestive voice, utterly without meaning.

The stuff of myth, I know.

Raven. Pallas. Nevermore.

Bullshit.

Ominous whispering, ghostly creatures watching you from the dark, knowing something you don't, creatures who would warn you if only you had the wit to understand.

But you don't, because you're not a creature in a myth, nor an artifact in a story.

Just a human being, frail and small, for all the changes wrought upon you by artificers beyond imagining.

Some time . . . some time, long ago, I stopped being a man and started being . . . what? I don't know.

An instrument.

Superhuman.

Unafraid.

Almost indestructible.

We knew we could die, but it didn't seem to matter.

We were supermen, together, and nothing more.

Overhead, kilometers away, I could see a score of birdlike things circling. Not what I'm waiting for, of course.

I remembered standing on a mountain not so very different from this one, not quite so high, but craggy, gray, cold. It was a natural world, not much like a human world, with cold nitrogen air, frigid nitrogen contaminated by gaseous ammonia, with icy liquid ethane that would sometimes condense and fall like rain.

The sun, not our sun, nor any sun we'd ever known, shone like a tiny, brilliant silver dot in a dull blue-purple sky. There were clouds, very high up, like tissue stratus, colored paler blue-white.

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Spinfellows dropped us here one day, armed to the teeth, as they say, and told us to kill whoever was lurking about; the people of this world were enemies, they said, in league with the terrible Starfish foe.

I remember they ran like buffalo across the plain below, the people of this world, armed only with spears and bows.

I remember going down among them afterward, walking among their hulked and steaming carcasses, dead bodies covered with stiff, icy chrome-steel fur, fur like thin, silvery metal strands.

Walking among them, I remembered decorating the Yuletide tree with my family, a very little boy then, doing the tree with my laughing mother, my smiling father holding my tiny sister up to watch as we draped it all over with thin, silvery metal strands.

Our guns had melted holes in the plain, leaving craters behind, coagulating craters full of chemical icewater.

I remember standing, quiet for a while, looking at a dead soldier, a soldier lying half-submerged in molten ground, slowly freezing into its grave. Its eyes were open and seemed to look at me, but utterly expressionless, without sight, life, meaning.

Another piece of myth, the eyes of the dead regarding the living, full of accusation.

All I had to do now was wait.

Finally they came, as the stemlight began to fade and the sky turned magenta.

Maybe a dozen of them, balloonsailers in a long line, far away, no more than black dots, strung out across the darkening sky. Impossibly remote overhead, the stemshine was no more than a smear of brilliant rust, fading into the ruddy afterglow.

I made my eyes behave, suppressing telescopic vision, making them remain no more than specks, like disciplined gnats in the long autumnal twilight.

That was how they looked before, though it wasn't on a world like this.

It must be horrible for them, discarded as worthless junk, cast away in an abandoned pipe, an inside-out world, a miniature world, adrift between the stars.

I remember that other world.

Immense.

Cold.

Like blue Neptune, with vast islands of fluffy aerogel ice floating in an empty blue sky, remote triple suns clustering together, tiny on the horizon, achingly brilliant for all their distance, streaking the sky with sunset, red, gold, green, smeared together, yet still distinct.

We didn't know when the Spinfellows would come for us, or if they would, although the battle was long over.

We'd killed their surrogates, hoped the Spinfellows would pick us up, take us away to fight another day—and knew what would happen if the Starfish caught us here.

They'll come.

Sure they will.

Spinfellows need us to win their war.

Win the war at last.

Balance of power broken.

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Starfish on the run.

I remember that it was Santos who suddenly pointed off into that reddening sky. *There.*

It was somebody else muttered, *Damn. Balloonsailers.*

Probably left behind, just like us, waiting for the Starfish to come, hoping the Spinfellows didn't get here first, knowing what would happen to them if they did.

Maybe there were seventy of us left out of the thousand who'd been combat-dropped a few days before. You could look around and see bad luck written across haggard faces.

Tired.

Even supermen get tired.

Half of us unarmed.

Most of the rest with nothing more than torches, a few grenades. We'd been rooting Beetles from the tunnels in the aerogel clouds, burning them, blasting tunnel mouths shut . . . watching those dots in the sky, I wondered if we could reopen a tunnel in the little time left.

No.

I'd looked down at the ballonet gun in my hands, knowing I was one of the few artillerymen left, knowing the others, with their useless torches and pitiful grenades, would be looking at me now.

I remember I tried to grin.

God knows what it must have looked like.

I remember I thumbed the arming button, listening to the condenser's whine, just like now.

I remember the balloonsailers came at us out of the sunset, just like now, as those nameless triple suns fell through the clouds, spreading a momentarily brilliant fan, a cascade of colors against the sky, Bifrost beckoning us homeward bound.

I wonder why they came?

Why not simply go away, hide in the shadows, pray for their Starfish to come?

Just doing their jobs, that's all.

Just like us.

They came, maybe forty or fifty of them in all, stooping on us out of a blackening sky, while frosty white stars popped out up above.

I remember I fired once, just as they came in range, hit one, watching him flare, tumbling out of formation, falling away into the infinite darkness below our little white island.

Maybe I would've liked watching him fall, fire sputtering sullen red, falling away to nothing, then gone.

No time.

The condenser whined, the ready light blinked, I fired again, someone else fired, other balloonsailers blazed and fell, one of them dropping onto the soft ice nearby, blazing up as oxygen got to it, making a sudden plume of blue smoke as it burned into the fragile ground.

People began firing their torches as they made the first pass, yellow-white fire splashing harmlessly.

There were screams.

When the balloonsailers arced away, there weren't so many of us any more. I got another one as it receded, balloonsailer exploding in a burst of beautiful silver light, sky suddenly freckled with lovely vermilion sparks.

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The shadow of a man fell from the explosion, arms and legs flailing as he dropped into black nowhere.

He'd fall for a long time before atmospheric pressure and growing heat killed him.

Supermen are tough.

Not too tough for these other soldiers, though.

I wonder where the Starfish found them?

Maybe they just made them.

I remember wedging myself into a little crack in the ice, I remember that I kept on shooting, while friends of mine screamed and died.

At some point, I watched the last balloonsailer catch fire, twist against the starry, starry night, arc off on its back, turn nose-down, and crash, exploding brilliant red, not far away.

When I pulled myself from the crevice, there were three other men standing, that's all, men with guns just like mine.

Spinfellows came for us the next morning and took us away into yellow sunrise, not commenting on what they'd found.

I sat now, watching the red sky turn deep indigo, watching the balloonsailers come. Out of the fading backdrop, three broad panels of stars began to form, still pale, still far away, nighttime hardly begun.

Wait.

Wait for it.

Wait 'til they're close enough.

I thumbed the condenser, feeling the gun arm itself in my hands. There, that's got their attention. They turned hard against the sky, arcing toward me, forming up for a combat run.

The spider muttered something and, when I looked, it was scurrying from its web.

They came, slowing, become like graceful ice dancers, circling the mountain peak, spiraling in close, round and round, watching me, waiting.

Will I have to shoot one to get it started?

Or can I just stand and wait. Wait for them to . . .

I sighted in, looking through the scope, watching the ready light blink.

Now?

I imagined the detonation.

Imagined the first balloonsailer falling, on fire, down to the earth below.

After a while, I lowered the gun, thumbed the détente button, and felt it grow still in my hands.

I laid it aside and stood, looking up at the balloonsailers, watching them circle about.

After a while, the circle broke and they began to stream away, receding into the night.

The last one called out to me, some high, incomprehensible wail, sounding so utterly lost.

When it was gone, when I was alone again, I wondered.

Maybe they miss their comrades.

Maybe, as they circled, round and round, they were only waiting for the same thing as I was.

Why is this so God-damned *hard?*

Somehow the night was dark, cold wind whipping around me, making a low moan that seemed to come from all directions, from nowhere close by.

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The spider got back in his web, chanting softly to himself, vaguely distracting, like theme music put in a drama by some incompetent producer who thought it might have something to do with atmosphere, with the ambiance of his tale.

I sat, clutching the gun between my thighs, hugging its warmth to my chest. In the dark and cold, I must be blazing infrared, making the crag a lighthouse beacon to sensitive eyes below. How many ersatz animals, how many abandoned machines, seeing my light, would grow nervous, wondering what it might mean? Or, worse yet, knowing.

All of them, perhaps.

I couldn't do it.

And neither could they.

Too complex a plan?

Well, the gun's in your hands, warm and suggestive, beckoning, waiting, as deadly as any balloonsailer who ever lived.

Not so hard to do what has to be done.

So just . . . but I continued to sit, emptied of imagery, unable to conjure the necessary scene.

Harder than I ever imagined it'd be, that's all.

Suddenly, I saw what it would look like to the creatures below, lost machines all, when I tripped the arming button, listened to the condenser whine, watched the ready light blink, a tiny spark of welcoming green, positioned the emission point and pulled the trigger.

It'd look, for just a moment, like someone had punched a hole through the walls of creation, out into whatever lies beyond.

Then it'd be done.

Over with.

As fast and unmomentous as anything in this universe could ever be.

I realized the spider had fallen silent.

When I looked up, there were two shadows, humanoid shapes on the ridgeline, flat black against the lesser darkness beyond.

I let my eyes get up to their tricks, making the night go steely gray and fill up with countless details.

Two silvergirls, sleek and slim, starlight glinting here and there, standing still, were looking down on me. One of them was obviously maimed, its left arm gone, socket exposed, a tatter of hanging shreds, like muscle and bone made of twisted, blackened metal. The other . . . face torn away, eyes and all, ragged hole covered over by a clumsily shaped, riveted-on patch. It had a radarset strapped to its head, grid nodding slowly, back and forth, up and down, cable running in under one side of the patch.

Nothing, just the two of them standing there, the blind one holding onto the cripple's lone hand.

After a while, the blind one said, "Well. And I thought they were no more." Soft silvergirl voice without emotion, just like my mother's silvergirls, all those long years ago, cold, remote, doing as they were told.

I could still taste their lips on mine; hear my sister's laughter.

They turned away, slipped below the ridgeline, down into the night, and were gone.

After a while, I stood, tucking the ballonet gun under my arm, and went to stand on the ridgeline where they'd been, while the spider chattered senselessly away. You could see their footsteps in the snow, a trail of pale blotches leading away down the slope, no creature so cold that it leaves no trace.

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I started walking slowly after them, not thinking of what I might want, or why.

In time, the darkness and cold were banished by orange morning light, stemshine flaring to life, coloring the sky, flooding fields of ruins and runaway garden forest, picking out patches of shadowy haze, bits of fog gathered in the hollows, burning them away.

Something like a free-flying kite, complete with child-made, knotted-rag white tail, floated overhead, dark shadow against a sky turning from orange to yellow, on its way to cornflower blue.

I'd walked down off the mountain, following the glow of my damaged silvergirls' trail. The splotches of light grew more widely spaced. Running now, putting distance between us. Eventually, they began to stumble and fall, pick themselves up and go on.

I kept on walking, slow, steady, one foot after another after another, untiring, unable to fall or falter. Machines can't do this. Machines wear out. Machines grow old. Life renews itself, going on whether you want it to or not.

In full daylight, the trail of footsteps faded away, hidden. I let my eyes do what they needed to, finding the disturbances for me, showing me the way the silvergirls had gone.

I walked through a cool yellow-green forest of towering zinnias, immense flat flowers of orange and red nodding in the breeze a dozen meters overhead, came out in a clearing and saw where the silvergirls had lived.

Gone now.

They'd left things behind, artifacts, tools . . .

I kneeled in the entrance to a hut, looking at a strewn-out rubble of clothing. Abandoned human clothing, patched and repaired, lovingly maintained.

Pretty things.

Feminine things.

Silvergirls went naked in the household where I was a boy, on the world where I grew up, on all the worlds where humans lived, and live no more.

Silvergirls were things.

Things we made to serve us.

Things without souls.

Things without need for pretty things of their own.

I remember playing by myself, all alone in a sandbox, somewhere on the palace grounds. I had my little cars and trucks, aircraft and spaceships arrayed in the sand, arrayed on roads I'd graded with my little bulldozer toys.

I remember the silvergirl silent by my side, silvergirl detailed to watch me, silvergirl helping me pack sand in a plastic bucket, helping me upend it, lift it away, leaving a fat truncated cone behind, standing free, smooth and brown. A building maybe, or a mountain, around which my roads could wind.

I remember looking up, seeing it look back at me with empty silvergirl eyes. I remember how it reached out to touch my hair, smooth it down ever so gently, hair lifted by a warm wind I hadn't noticed before.

Standing in the empty silvergirl village, village of remains, spoils from a world-wide refuse heap, I imagined them here, broken silvergirls, tossed away with all the rest of the junk, dressing up in their salvaged finery.

My mother's silvergirls . . .

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I remembered suddenly being on a starship, orbiting in the sky, looking down at my homeworld.

Someone standing beside me had said, "It's like those pictures of Luna you sometimes see in old books."

Yes, like any terrestrial moon, or world, in the era of planetary formation, at the time of maximum bombardment, glowing pink under a haze of pale silica vapor, craters shining brilliant yellow-white amid red seas of flowing magma.

I turned away from the village and walked on, following them still.

I found her where the silvergirls left her staked out for me, naked, supine, spread-eagled, blindfolded, wrists bound to stakes driven into the damp, mossy ground, in a cool, dim green tunnel of a trail, cut through a forest of dry, long-dead trees under a canopy of pale, weeping vines.

I stood looking down at her, not a woman, not a child, not a human thing at all, with her short, feathery silver hair, long, slim, motionless limbs, bare, dry vulva sprung open by the position in which she'd been bound.

I remember once overhearing two women discuss that special moment when a man sees them naked for the first time.

The first one swore she could see the light of love dawning in his eyes.

The other one nodded, smiling, looking ever so wise.

I remember wondering how it was they didn't know the truth.

Wondering why none of them seem to know, why they think men are something else entirely.

Maybe they don't want to know.

Maybe I wouldn't want to know, myself, about that terrible spasm of desire, nothing at all like love.

A moment like nothing so much as an inexplicable urge to strangle a kitten in your bare hands, kitten struggling as it dies, tongue protruding, eyes popping from its head, until there's nothing left in your hands but a sodden lump of empty, matted fur.

The allomorph's nostrils flared slightly, sampling for pheromones. The skin on her chest seemed to thicken imperceptibly, tiny pink nipples growing, perhaps, just a bit, vulval flesh darkening ever so slightly.

I stood still, waiting, watching a tool do its work.

She lifted her head, blindfold facing me, knowing where I was, tipping her face back and forth, as if trying to see.

My combat shield tickled, warning me I'd been probed by a short-range nerve-induction scanner.

I hadn't seen one of these in a long time, already had my protective implants before I met the first one. No way of knowing what it must be like to be worked over by a psychiatric allomorph, as naked as a human being possibly can be.

She licked her lips, a careful human gesture, part of an artfully programmed charade, and, voice hoarse, betraying some faux emotion that passed me by, whispered, "Are you really human? That . . . shield. I can't tell."

As I knelt on the forest floor, untying her bonds, her nostrils flared again, driving change, fuzz of silver hair blooming across her escutcheon, breasts beginning to form.

When the last rope was released, she sat quietly on the mossy ground and waited for me to take the blindfold away, exposing fathomless eyes of glass.

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* * *

As we walked, through dim green forest, over bright, stemlit plains dotted with tumbledown mechanical ruins, walking away from the silvergirls' trail, all the long way back to my no-longer-abandoned camp, she said, "Call me Deseret."

"Desirée?"

She spelled it out for me.

Ah. Got it. "Ashe," I said.

At first, she tried to walk in front of me, naked and pretty, letting me watch her change from thing to girl to woman stage by stage. Tried to stop me from walking, getting in my path, slowing down, walking backward, facing me, smiling just so, getting upwind and flooding the air between us with desperate chemical signals.

I felt myself tighten up inside, just before the filters in my lungs kicked in, cutting it off, exhaling her own coded provocation back at her.

She stood still in my path, looking up at me, face so serious, head tipped back, hands clasped behind her waist, heels apart, toes pointing slightly away from the centerline of her body, shine of desire visible on her inner thighs.

I'd stood still, looking down at her for just a moment, then stepped to one side, stepped around her, and walked on.

She stayed behind me for a while after that, walking softly, footfalls almost inaudible, keeping up, nonetheless. When she came abreast of me, walking head down, as if pensive, she was a girl again, woman-parts mostly reabsorbed.

Somewhere, some time, in some long ago factory, they made her to be a tool, useful to a human world in which she had no nonfunctional role.

I wonder if her designers, men and women long vanished, ever imagined she'd walk down this trail, lost and useless, full of unimaginable longings.

She's the only child of those dead souls, left behind in the noösphere to mark their passing. A pencil vanishes utterly, used up, thrown away, but its dust persists in drawings made, words written down.

Overhead, a vee of shiny birdlike things flew, crossing our path not far ahead, low enough I could hear the soft buzz of their shiny metal wings, one red, one green, one blue, stemlight glinting as they passed from left to right. Deseret's head tipped as she watched them, tracking quickly, some unknown hunger filling her pretty face, not reaching into the depths of her clear, featureless eyes.

Eyes like tiny, optically perfect windows into an unlit room.

She glanced at me and I wondered how her face could be pretty. So many human cultures, races new and old, formed across time and space. No one thing for the word *pretty* to mean.

If I'd been looking, I would've seen the pretty face form, using my own face as a template, an appropriate pretty girl for a standard pretty superman. Now that I was watching, she became distinctly more female again.

I said, "Why'd they put you out like that?" Not that I couldn't guess.

She smiled, making my heart falter, no filter ever made that can stop a pretty girl's smile. Not without erasing the man within from the mannequin without. "Get you off their trail. Give them a little more time to get away."

Maybe the silvergirls imagined me on top of her, not even undoing those bonds, blindfold in place, allomorph spread out for me just so. He's human, male, this is all he really needs, they might whisper among them-

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selves, remembering a time when they lived among humans, male and female alike.

"Did you live with them?" Imagining panicky silvergirls betraying a friend? Humans made them. Maybe we made them with all our flaws.

She shook her head, looking up at the sky, empty blue now, not a cloud in sight. The stemshine was brightening, burning white, burning the sky dark azure, making it seem impossibly far away. When she turned and looked at me, we stopped walking. Not a girl anymore.

She said, "I try to stay away from them. Let them get on with their business. Hope they'll let me get on with mine."

Their business. What business is there for abandoned tools? I walked on, waiting, stemlight coloring my skin emerald.

After a while, Deseret said, "It's their world now, Green Man. They're afraid you've come to take it away."

"And you?"

"No world for me."

The tent was just where I left it, sturdy and stiff atop its little hill, clasped in the crook of a slow-running river. Overhead, the stemshine was darkening, turning red against the dark blue sky, some tawny light beginning to form, emerging everywhere across the sky at once.

No horizon here.

I knelt and opened the pack, marveling that I'd remembered to put the cookstove away before setting out on my final errand, taking my gun on its long, pointless walk to the mountain, the gun now lying flat on the ground beside me, unfired.

Something in the gun might have longings too. . . .

Deseret stood a little distance away, back toward me, looking out across the landscape, hair ruffling in the wind. It seemed a little longer now than it'd been before, and from this angle, she was more woman than girl. Subtle effects, tried and true, tried and tried again.

Overhead, vermilion began spilling through the sky.

I pulled the cookstove out of the pack and sat crosslegged on the ground, looking at its shiny metallic resistance elements, a technology older, by just the tiniest bit, than starships. Older than what made me as well.

I released the first and simplest of my locks, feeling hunger bloom in my gut.

Softly, Deseret said, "In the olden days, I used to come here with a friend."

I pulled a ration card from the pack and set it on the stove, not bothering to read the label, trying not to remember what those olden days were like, trying not to picture what Deseret might have been like, picturing who her friend might have been.

A man like me? A client for whatever health-maintenance compact had owned her, had thrown her away, or merely forgotten her?

Or just some other tool?

Friend is such a complicated word.

I got out another pack and put it beside the first, ordering the stove to do its job. Deseret turned, probably picking up my command with her scanners. That's *her* job, left over from the olden days.

I saw she'd turned woman again, but subdued, barely defined.

Just enough.

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She said, "Is one of those for me?"

I nodded.

She said, "I'm glad you remembered we can eat."

Something hooted from a patch of dark forest over where the valley floor began to slope upward toward the plain. Beyond the forest, towering out of the mist of distance, the endcap cliffs were colored blood-red, etched with shadows by the fading stemlight.

Somewhere far overhead, unseeable by mortal eyes, an indistinct blotch of gray to me, lay the backside of the docking portal. When I arrived, I hadn't given any thought to how I might get out again.

I turned away and found Deseret standing before me, fully fleshed out once more, face shadowed and reddened by the fading light, body swollen, prepared, ready.

Nothing in her empty eyes, of course.

Beyond her, the ration cards were expanding on the stovetop, opening like flowers, rich steam rising, bringing us the flavor of the meal. One pack held a steak, baked potato, sour cream, butter, onions. The other one was a sausage pizza.

She touched me, making me look down. Breasts against me now, flattening out just so. Hand on my chest, fingers splayed. Face . . . *ineffable.* Isn't that what we say when we see . . . well. Still nothing in her eyes.

I shook my head slowly, trying to turn away, to reach for the meals that neither of us needed.

Familiar.

That's all.

Familiar comfort.

She said, "Please."

That utter desperation.

I know what it is to be a broken tool, thrown away, discarded as useless.

So you do what you have to do then, like any good soldier.

The filters and locks released and went down in proper sequence.

The most beautiful thing in the world is a woman's face while you make love to her.

Your hands do what they do, like robot hands belonging to another, working a body glimpsed from the corner of one eye, all dark shadow and faraway depth. Some other world. Some other place. Some other time.

All you can see is eyes full of fire, a face made taut and wonderful by the familiar tides of desire.

Sunrise.

But no sun.

Stemshine blossoming overhead, familiar golden bar melting out of the black depths of interstellar night, filling the world with light.

The valley outside the tent was the same, come morning. Same warm wind, same winding stream, same ersatz mechanical man looking out at it through indestructible eyes.

Except some part of him knows he's not a machine, not *made* to be anything in particular, not made at all.

"Come home with me."

That's all she said as we stood together, watching stemlight wash over the nameless world. Come home with me, soldier.

I wonder who thought up those lines for her to say?

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Imagination conjured a programmer for me, some small fat man with greasy skin, a tangle of filthy gray hair, hunched over an antique keyboard, typing away with sweaty palms.

How could a man like that imagine such a woman's face, tell it how to look, what to reflect, back into the eyes of the watcher?

Some historical drama no doubt, seen as a child and forgotten into the depths of subconscious memory, becoming its own archetype.

A silent nod.

Tent folding itself up without a word, crawling into the backpack.

Then we were away, walking through the ruin of the world.

As if it were the only world, and we the only ones in it.

Walking by the glittery stream with its rush of dark water.

Listening to the soft howl of wind, bending through the tops of swaying old trees.

Loblolly pines. I remember that's what they're called.

In time I realized Deseret was skipping by my side, laughing, looking at me.

Not quite singing.

Maybe just in her heart.

Or whatever you want to call the thing that rests inside a living machine.

We rested together on a beach beside a depthless blue ocean beneath a colorless noonday sky, though neither of us needed rest, would ever need to rest.

Tireless, like the machines of myth.

In time, we walked on, skirting a dank, dark green forest, tall, gaunt trees that seemed to exude a pale gray mist, gray mist filling the spaces between, hiding the depths of the forest. Walked across the foothills of some nameless, blocky mountains, broken blue stone veined with bright silver, mountains perhaps no more than some industrial residue, waiting for a recycling crew that would never come again.

Stood together on a hillside, holding hands like children, looking down on another small valley, more secluded than the other, holding just the tiniest of streams. There was a lot of messy-looking shrubbery, thorn bushes, clearings here and there, a little sandy beach, a few tents in the shadow of a scrubby old apple tree, green apples hanging from its branches like Christmas-tree ornaments.

And beside the tree, buried in regolith to its axles, treads broken and gone . . .

I whispered, "Main battle tank. Standard ARM Corporation Model 56, body-style IIa." As I watched, its turret seemed to shift in my direction. Seemed to, but there was only a soft, stuttering whine of broken gears, a distant, chattery whir. The turret settled, stuck in place, but the periscope sensor lifted and slowly turned to look.

Deseret whispered, "His name is Thomas."

Sunset sky, deep indigo overhead, striated with the barest hint of lilac . . . the stemshine hung far beyond the blue, like a dim cloud of slag, on the edge of fiery oblivion. In two great, arching bands to either side, stars were appearing as the darkness deepened.

Strange, strange new world for such a tired old universe.

Empires beyond the stars that destroyed us all, yet survived themselves.

Nothing of the old, gray widow-maker.

No widows left behind.

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No lost children.

Nothing left but their broken old toys.

Deseret and her two friends, Holly and Melîna were their names, lived together in a little valley, in the shadow of Thomas the Main Battle Tank, living on because they had nothing better to do, keeping, they said, out of the silvergirls' way.

Someday, they said, the world will be made whole again by the silvergirls' labor.

What place in it for us, then? they whispered, one by one. Maybe none, was the chorused answer.

I made them dinner on my little camp stove, scanning their joy, freely given, like memories of sunlight, long ago fled, sat by the open flap of the tent with Deseret at my side . . .

The other two were watching, I could see, holding themselves rigid, in neutral state, holding their pheromones in. Honor among machines, not striving for each other's position? What humans were ever so honest, ever so honorable as that?

Behind us in the gathering darkness, Thomas stirred in his grave, a rustle of mostly dead engine parts, a whisper of jammed gears rubbing softly together, a pattering shower of corrosion.

Overhead, a pattern of lights sailed the sky, coming between us and the stars. Balloonsailers. No running lights, of course, just the pale fire of engine exhaust. If I listened, I could hear the rumble of combustion.

I pictured myself firing on them again, from the summit of my cold, snowy mountain, and found I could no longer remember why I came. Oh, I know the reason. Remember it all too well. But the reason's gone, along with that cold ache . . . too many old machines, too many broken tools with that same cold ache inside.

Deseret leaned close, rubbing her soft head against my shoulder, rubbing on skin proof against any degree of vacuum and cold, flesh that could withstand . . .

She whispered, "Drop your shields?"

Take off that too-inhuman flesh. Expose that warm, soft underbelly . . . When I did, she let me sample what was inside Holly and Melîna, flooding me with their need.

Too human?

No. A human wouldn't care.

They're just machines, after all.

Things made for us, not we for them.

"Ashe?"

I took a deep breath, held it for a long moment, let it go.

Felt something flood out of me, some unknown fear.

"All right."

You do what you have to do, if you are who you are.

Midnight, and the stars arced overhead in two dense bands, striping the sky between swathes of black. Somewhere up there, the stemshine hung, visible light output suspended. If I wanted to look, I could see the infrared, night-warmth radiated to the ground below. If I wanted to look, I could see other lands, far-away lands, hanging overhead beyond the sky. If I wanted to look, there would be my tall, cold mountain, pennon of snow still trailing in the wind like a motionless flag. If I wanted to.

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Wind whispering endlessly in the trees.

As if this were a natural world, wind driven by the chaotic heat engines of climate, by the rolling twist of coriolis force.

Fans. Somewhere here, underground, there are fans.

I could picture them, great blades turning, slowly, slowly, casting long shadows down the ductwork.

Maybe once there were children here. Bold children who would sneak into the ductwork, walk deep underground, come to see the slow fans turn, filling their world with wind. Maybe they took silvergirls along for company.

A whisper from the darkness.

I walked toward it.

"Hello, soldier," it said, voice sounding as though called forth from the dust.

"Hello, Thomas, old comrade."

"Have we met?"

"Does it matter?"

Brief pause, then, "No. Of course not."

We know each other well, battletank and infantryman. I could remember marching in his shadow, time and time again. He could remember me swarming round him in countless, stickman shadows, daring the fire.

We've been together forever.

He said, "Why'd you come, soldier?"

I shrugged, knowing he'd see. "It . . . seemed like the place for me to . . ." What? What do I want to say?

Thomas, voice so very warm then, whispered, "I understand."

Do you? Of course you do. I reached out and put my hand on one crumpled fender, feeling the way whiskers had sprung from the composite, breaking, popping up out of half-melted osmiridium matrix. Once upon a time, there'd been coherent light reflex armor mounted here. Taken away, some long time ago.

I pictured the armorers walking away, carrying their salvage, leaving him here to die. Did they understand it would take so long? Did they care?

Evidently not.

He said, "I'd leave, if I could."

There was a cold hand on my heart. "I understand."

He said, "I knew you would, soldier. I knew I could count on you."

I laid my head on his fender, breathing in the scent of old machine.

He said, "I saw you on the mountain, soldier. I was afraid you wouldn't wait for me."

"Sorry. I . . ." I remembered myself up on the cold mountain, alone with the whispering spider and my poor paralyzed hands. One little tug, that's all it would've taken, but I . . . I said, "The balloonsailers knew."

He said, "They always do. They've been waiting as long as any one of us."

Any one of us.

Then, he said, "I was hoping the silvergirls would wait, but they haven't. I'm sorry soldier."

When I turned my senses on and looked skyward, there they were, circling round and round like witches on their broomsticks, coming for me, I suppose. Coming for us.

It was the moment in which they would secure their future.

I wish I knew what was in their minds. Wish I had known. A brief moment of explanation, that's all. This is so unnecessary.

As are all such moments.

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Too late.

Thomas's turret groaned and his guns tilted skyward. "Get the allomorphs away, soldier. I'll hold them off."

His guns went *pom-pom,* stuttering so loud, brilliant streaks of violet leaping skyward.

My tent exploded in a gout of orange flame, a compact mushroom cloud.

I got to the backpack, surrounded by molten fragments, small red flames guttering on the ground, got it open, felt myself grow suddenly vast and terrible, summoning all-too-human fire in the service of my all-too-human name.

Looked skyward, reaching out for them.

When it ended, there was nothing left but smoke, bits of dying flame. And the voice of Thomas the Main Battle Tank, punched into pieces by the silvergirls' fire, whispering, "Soldier . . ." Ever so softly, "Please, soldier. I've been such a good machine. Please don't let me down. . . ."

I looked at him for just a moment, featureless in the darkness, molten metal sizzling in pools on the red hot ground. Nodded slowly, knowing he might still be able to see.

You do what you have to do then.

If you're a good soldier.

I buried what little of Holly I could find, buried her among the smoldering fragments of Thomas the Main Battle Tank, pushing his parts together in the crater my gun left behind. No need for a marker. Not here.

Maybe the silvergirls will come someday, clean up this mess, dispose of what's useless, recycle the rest into shiny new machines. No matter that they'll be gone then. I'll remember who they were.

There was enough left of Melîna I knew she could be saved, given the resources of any decent machine shop, so I bundled up the pieces and put them away in my backpack, rolling them up in magic canvas one by one, imagining each bit stirred, ever so slightly, at my touch.

Deseret?

Evidently, she'd managed to get out of the tent just before the silvergirls struck, had been running away from the blast. From some angles, she looked like a sleeping child, eyes closed, face quiet and sweet. I found her foot quite easily, lodged at the base of a broken tree. Looked for her arm a little while before giving it up.

I know a man can make her a new arm she'll never know is not the same.

I dropped my shields and awoke her with a scan, watched her eyes of glass open and look at me.

Strange how, with no armor between us, they don't seem empty anymore.

Whispered: "Soldier . . ."

"I'm here."

She said, "My friends . . . all my friends . . ."

I said, "Sleep now, Deseret. Sleep and dream. When you awaken, I'll still be here."

The eyes closed.

Face in repose.

Something almost like a smile there.

Smile of a child who trusts you'll keep your given word.

When she was put away, I shouldered the backpack and went on my way, back across broken old landscape, all the way to the endcap mountains.

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I climbed the red cliffs as the stemshine blossomed to life, throwing my shadow before me on meaningless crags, no more than the artifice of some maker's hand, infinitely less than the splendor of a wild world, made by no hand at all, the imagining of some insensate mind.

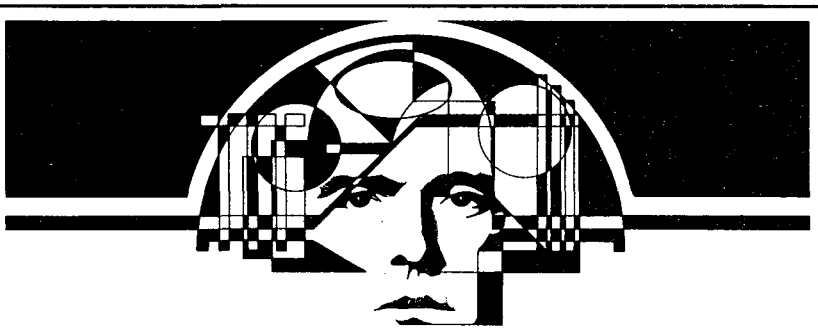
Stood for a long time then, looking out into the blue mist of the silvergirls' world, at broad, rolling, ruin-filled plains, rivers, seas, ranges of dark-shadowed hills, my own special mountain with its white spray of snow.

Broke the gun between my hands and threw it away, down into the world for the silvergirls to find. Turned away and went out the lock, out to where the faraway stars rolled and rolled, unaffected by foolish deeds, senseless pride, useless fear.

Stood for a while, watching them turn, marveling at how little it'd taken to bring me here. What did I think I was going to accomplish? Nothing, I suppose. And nothing left now but to open the datawarren connector and summon a ride.

You do what you have to do.

Because, sometimes, all that's left is life. O



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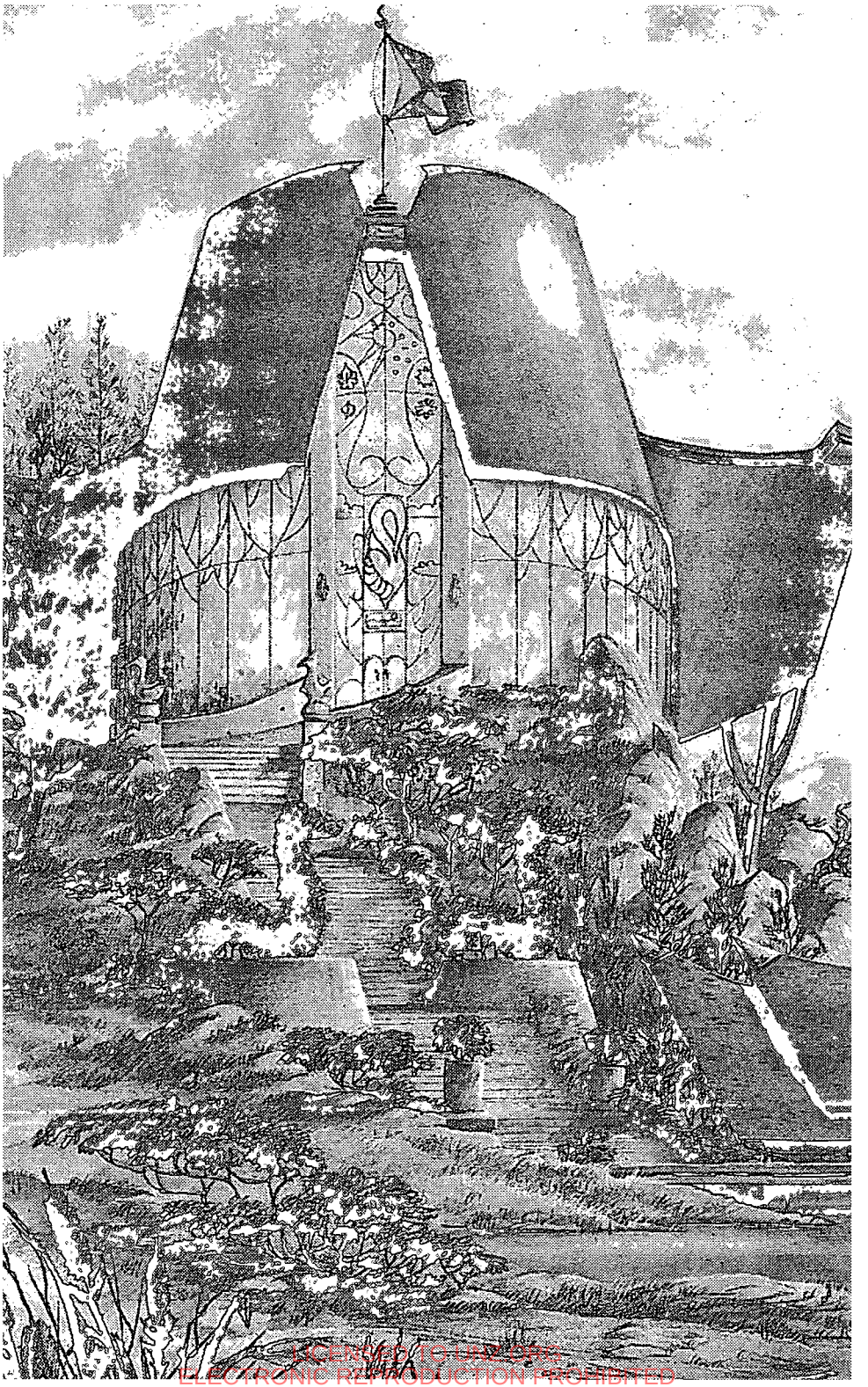

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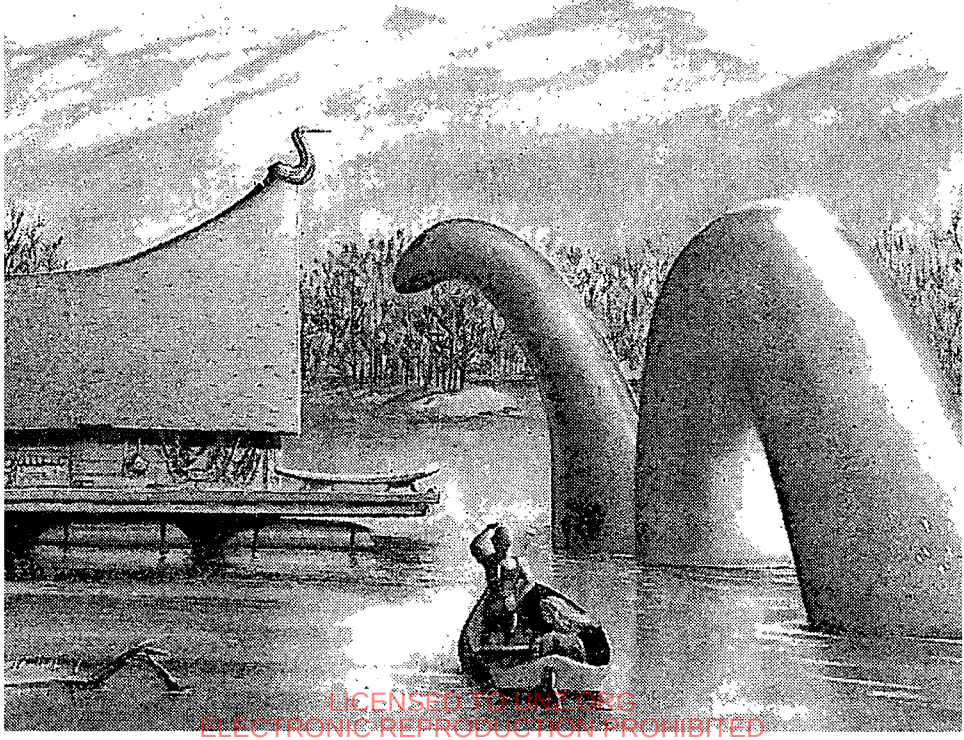
Robert Reed

HUMAN BAY

Robert Reed's first short story collection, *The Dragons of Springplace*, is just out from Golden Gryphon Press. According to Mr. Reed, over half the tales in his book first appeared in the pages of *Asimov's*. His latest story for us is set on a mythical alternate Earth where sea serpents and Sasquatches abide, and where human beings still make the same old mistakes.

Illustration by Darryl Elliott



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Dabs-the-Dream had not said a word, but when they reached the dock, Whistle urged his bride to be quiet. Then he put the key to the lock, and remembering his father's trick, jiggled it twice while muttering a little chant to help the metal move. The bolt released with a jarring thump. Then the hinges gave a squeal as the door swung open, and from inside the serpenthouse came the sound of water sloshing against stout wooden piles.

"Hello," Whistle called out. "It's me, Grand Gal. Hello."

Dabs took his hand, and squeezed.

The last light of a very long day led them into the serpenthouse. A heavy oak bench stood on their right, old rope waiting to be mended and even older tools begging to be used. Drab yellow life jackets hung from hooks on the long walls. The old saddle dangled from the ceiling, as massive as ever, yet in the same instant looking small. How could four people sit on it comfortably? But when you're a child, Whistle reflected, comfort always seems to come easily enough. Doesn't it?

A long, massive head rose from the water, then exhaled, the cold spray triggering memories as it filled the air with a rich fishy stink.

"Grand Gal," said Whistle. "This is Dabs-the-Dream."

"Look at you," Dabs exclaimed. "You're just magnificent!"

The serpent had always lived inside this house, at least since Whistle was a toddler. And there had always been something old about her, what with her great size and the stiff gray bristles of her mane and those enormous and wise inky eyes set in that rugged face. But where a boy sensed great age, a grown man found a reassuring youthfulness. Despite the decades, her blubber-smooth body remained strong, the heavy ropes singing as her muscles played against them. The surviving teeth were long and curled and more white than yellow. And maybe the eyes had clouded over, but there was still a glimmer about them, a vigilance, and, Whistle hoped, a hint of genuine recognition.

"You remember me," he sang out, patting the serpent's cold wet neck. "Sure you do. I can tell."

Dabs stood back from the water's edge, watching.

Inspiration struck.

"What do you think?" he asked. "A quick ride along the shoreline?"

Her expression changed, eyes lifting, studying the wood and rubber saddle.

But then Whistle remembered how long it took to secure the saddle on Gal's back, then lift the serpent's door. And besides, he was out of practice. "Maybe you're right," he allowed. Giving the serpent another hard pat, he said, "Tomorrow. That's my promise, girl!"

The long body rippled in anticipation, or perhaps just out of reflex.

Whistle retreated, making certain the door was locked behind them.

What had been a cool day, even for early summer, was turning into a chilly night. Climbing the stairs to the cabin, Dabs walked with her hands tucked under her arms, saying little when Whistle pointed to landmarks and mentioned scraps of family history. "The main cabin is past those trees. And the boathouse cabin is past it. The trail's obvious in daylight." He wrapped an arm around her bare waist, then said, "We've got the newest cabin. My grandfather built it for his honeymoon, when he was my age. Before the trains ran up here. Back when people rode here in wagons or on the backs of mammoths."

Electric lights were coming to life across the bay, betraying little windows and their massive long cabins.

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"Now who are they?" Dabs inquired.

He recited family names, each prominent somewhere in the world.

Then she asked, "What about that place?"

Near the mouth of the bay, set on one of the Little Sister islands, was an enormous cabin. No, not a cabin. It was practically a mansion. And a strangely designed mansion at that, with more windows than walls and its interior lit with dozens of bright lights. Whistle needed several moments to recall the story: A family of magicians had built that place two winters ago, their magic so powerful that nobody was sure of their name.

Dabs nodded thoughtfully; Whistle assumed that she was listening to him.

The sun was down, but it had yet to pull the salmon skies after it. Looking across the smooth coppery water, Whistle promised his bride and himself, "We'll ride Gal tomorrow. Across the bay and back, at least."

When Dabs said nothing, Whistle realized, at last, that she wasn't comfortable with this subject. And not for the first time, he reminded himself that four months was never long enough to get to know another soul.

Dabs let him squeeze the solid curve of her buttock.

But when he lifted his hand to her face, she winced and said, "Before bed, would you wash that, please? You smell like that miserable creature down there."

Uncle Dactyl had done his usual exemplary job of preparing the cabins for summer. The calendar in the kitchen showed who would be staying, and when. "Whistle and bride," had been written neatly, followed by a no-nonsense line stretching into the future for half of the month. Dactyl and Aunt Hope would follow them. Which wasn't bad news, but it was sobering. Whistle had tremendous respect for his uncle—respect edging on fear—and he would have to make sure that they left cabin perfectly clean before they left, nothing unmended or out of place.

The next morning, while Dabs slept, Whistle recited his family's chants and set out the daily sacrifice for the ravens. Then he tried to find one of the old books that taught a novice how to pilot a serpent through public waterways. Just as a refresher course, naturally. But nothing useful was on the bookshelves, or even tucked away inside the countless drawers and cupboards. Whistle did come across a fancy bound history of the lake, and he set it aside for Dabs. Then inside one deep closet, he found his uncle's favorite bridle as well as some kind of large black-and-bone colored banner.

Folded neatly and tied with string, the banner was made from a thick, oily fabric, lighter than down, something about it almost unreal, as if it were only fooling his senses that it existed. Pinned to the banner was a cryptic note. In Uncle Dactyl's neat script, it warned the world, "Do not employ!" Which made Whistle all the more curious, and that's why he removed the note and carefully untied the string.

The growl of an engine interrupted his adventure.

Stepping outside, looking between the mossy trunks of the pines, he could see the fish barge approaching. By the time he reached the serpenthouse, a vaguely familiar man, old but vigorous, was tying up against the long wall. He wore a wide hat but no shirt, his chest adorned with powerful tattoos and pierced with long fish bones. Opening the feeding chute with a practiced grace, he told his helper, "Ten of the trout. And give her those top few whitefish, too."

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His helper was a male sasquatch, enormous and compliant. Probably smart enough to count to ten, Whistle sensed, but no farther. With a giant hand, the sasquatch grabbed fish from the ice boxes and tossed them to the old man, who in turn dropped them headfirst down the narrow chute.

Whistle stepped closer. "Do I remember you? Didn't you feed Grand Gal when I was a boy?"

Without quite looking at him, the bargemaster said, "How are you, good sir? No, it was my father you remember, I think. Good sir."

"Oh," said Whistle, a little disappointed. "I see."

"Sorry about their size," the man continued, plainly expecting to be reprimanded. "But they're the best available, what with the fishery being as she is."

Now that he mentioned it, the trout weren't the specimens that Whistle remembered. Even accounting for a child's perspective, these were little fish. A forearm in length, if that. He had to ask, "What's wrong with the fishery?"

"Too many nets, too many hooks. Good sir."

"But don't these come from the Inland Seas?" Whistle countered. "Surely there's plenty of fish in all that water."

Catching the next trout, the bargemaster shouted to the sasquatch, "Wait." Then to Whistle, he said, "Come here, sir. If you please."

A narrow walkway ran along the wall. Whistle eased his way out to the feeding chute, then said, "All right."

"See these round marks, sir?"

Bright red circles showed on the trout's belly and sides. "Yes, I do."

"When they opened that new shipping canal from the ocean, an eel swam upstream. A vicious parasite, it is. These are scars here. Scars left by the eel's teeth, sir."

"Oh."

The poor trout was shoved down the chute. Instantly, with a quick little slurp, Grand Gal gulped it down, just as she did the rest of the day's food.

"If you would, sir," the bargemaster continued, "tell whoever's in charge—"

"My uncle."

"Tell your uncle I'm contracting for better." He moved a little stiffly, closing the chute and untying the barge. "Next month, I'll start getting shipments from the northern lakes. Which'll mean new rates, naturally. But that's our only choice, I'm afraid."

Whistle could only say, "Fine."

The sasquatch claimed a broad seat up on the bow. The wind gusted, and the stink of fish and fur rose up to Whistle. Ringing a charmed bell several times, the bargemaster tried to soothe the wind. He said, "Good day, sir," without a backward glance. Then the big outboard came to life, pushing the barge across the open water, taking the rest of the scarred fish to the other cabins.

When Whistle returned to his cabin, Dabs was awake and dressed.

If there was any tension left over from last night, it remained in hiding. They ate fried liver and eggs for breakfast and enjoyed a full pot of coffee, then spent the rest of the morning strolling along the rocky beach, sometimes wading in the very clear, very chilly water.

After lunch, they made love. Then it was Whistle's turn to sleep. When he woke, he called for Dabs, but she didn't answer. He dressed and went down to the dock to find her sitting in the sun, every window of the old ser-

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penthouse propped open as well as both of its doors. And Grand Gal wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"She's doing fine," Dabs insisted. Without prompting.

Then his bride added, "She surfaces every few minutes. And she had a big fish in her mouth that last time."

Whistle absorbed the shock slowly, and badly.

Then as the wind gusted, something moved above him, and he found himself staring at a long, vaguely familiar banner, a black-and-bone colored loon shining in that bright, bright sunshine.

Whistle and Dabs had a modern marriage. Their families, each with a child too old to be alone in life, had contacted each other through a professional service. Preliminary negotiations led to a carefully arranged introduction. If one had despised the other, or worse, been genuinely bored, then nothing more would have happened. But Whistle, for one, agreed by not complaining too much, and from there the rest of the business happened quickly and almost without pain.

On the eve of their wedding, they met with the best shaman that Dabs' family could afford—a cranky, one-eyed woman who spoke about the sanctity of marriage, then cured them of various ailments, and finally, using magic and intuition, stared off into their future with her surviving eye.

"You'll have children," she promised. Then, almost as an afterthought, "And you will have real happiness, too. Though not so quickly, I think."

There were worse pairings, they told themselves.

In secret, Whistle had been disappointed that Dabs' family wasn't nearly as prominent as his, nor did it offer any sort of dowry. But she was a beautiful woman, strong and enduring, with the meaty breasts of a natural mother and a huge if sometimes misguided heart.

"You shouldn't have done this," said Whistle, fighting to keep his voice under control.

Dabs regarded him for a moment, then looked across the water. Whatever she intended to say was squelched when the serpent emerged not a half-throw from the dock, Grand Gal's spray and breath flavoring the air.

He turned and shouted, "Come on, Gal! Come back here!"

The serpent reacted to his voice. Or maybe not. Maybe it was coincidence that the long head dove into the clear cold water and the great tail beat hard once, then again. Then the head rose high, something about that great face joyous as it turned and looked back along the body, fogged eyes focused on the serpenthouse, and Whistle, almost taunting him as Gal raced straight across the bay.

Dabs was standing, hands on hips, breasts swaying.

In a careful, almost sorry voice, she said, "Well, *this* is different."

Whistle couldn't speak. He could barely form a coherent thought. Only when his emotions dropped to a manageable panic did he realize what scared him most. It wasn't that the serpent would get hurt; nothing on this lake could challenge her. And it wasn't that Grand Gal would hurt anyone or cause damage. She would never do either, at least not intentionally. And it wasn't even the potential embarrassment. His grandmother and spinster aunt were staying at the main cabin. If they saw any of this, the entire family would hear of it, and Whistle's misadventure would become an instant legend. Like his older brother's bankruptcy, or Great-uncle Talon's unfortunate romance with that lady sasquatch.

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No. What frightened him—what made him pale and weak—was the blistering fury that he felt toward Dabs.

"Should we do something?" she asked.

He didn't answer. He didn't dare speak. Inside the serpenthouse, set against one long wall, was an old sliver boat. He eased it into the water, then tossed in life jackets and three paddles—in case one paddle was lost—then started searching for a bridle.

Then he remembered Uncle Dactyl's bridle, and in a dead sprint, he ran up through the woods and found it where he had left it, every one of its claws shiny and well-sharpened, a bright brass plate proclaiming, "Property of The-Dreams."

"But what if she doesn't want to come near us?"

Dabs asked that reasonable question when he returned, then had the good sense to keep her distance.

They needed bait. Yes. And bless him, his uncle had stocked the locker with treats no serpent could resist. Dried salmon was Whistle's first choice, but to be cautious, he tossed in a long piece of dried biltong.

Another worry took hold of him.

"Can you see her?" he cried out, finally climbing down into the boat.

She was standing at a little window. "I . . . I don't think so. . . ."

"Come on!"

They paddled into the open water, the abrupt sunshine making Whistle squint and wish for a hat. He sat in the stern, kneeling, working the paddle and trying to steer. And bless her, Dabs worked hard, her muscled back in shadow now, her thick black hair twisting in the wind. They weren't as powerful or as practiced as some people, but the boat was light and the winds remained merciful. Eventually they were across the bay, sliding from dock to dock, Dabs holding a chunk of salmon underwater while Whistle shouted, "Gal?" at each of the serpenthouses. "Are you visiting friends, Gal? Gal!"

The big doors were a meshwork of reinforced steel bars. If there was a serpent inside, they would hear the telltale snort or wet splash. But only half of the houses seemed occupied, and the silence knocked loose a memory: Was it last winter? Whistle's father had mentioned that some of their summer neighbors had stopped replacing their old serpents, while others sold theirs to whomever had money and the room.

These were lean days; that was the great and sorry truth for every family, regardless of its status.

Whistle looked at Dabs when she looked back at him. At last, she seemed to realize the enormity of her mistake. Holding the salmon steak in both hands, she asked, "What if we can't find her?"

"We go to the public docks and hire help. That old man who feeds her, maybe."

"But what if he can't catch her?"

"Then," said Whistle. And he paused. And only after a deep breath did he admit, "She'll eat every fish that's in this lake, probably before the end of summer."

Dabs looked stunned.

"Serpents as big as her never lived wild in this water," he told her. "That's why. There just isn't room for them."

She winced, then asked, "But is that likely? All summer?"

Something worse occurred to Whistle, and he said it.

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"No," he told her grimly. "No, most likely someone will shoot her first. An angry fisherman, I would guess."

With both hands, she placed the dark salmon back under the waves.

"I'm sorry," she squeaked.

Then the regrets found him. Whistle took a little breath, followed by a larger one, preparing his apologies. He was telling himself to get used to apologizing. Marriage was little else. But as his eyes lifted, his thoughts changed, and he heard himself telling his bride, "I see her. Out by the island. There!"

In daylight, at close range, the mansion was even more impressive than it seemed at night. Covering the top third of the rocky island, it was as tall as the surrounding pines. Its walls were almost transparent from all the windows. Thin slats of wood filled in the gaps, and the steeply pitched roof was shingled with slick black tiles that might have been polished obsidian. Squinting, Whistle found what seemed to be the main doorway, but it was missing its sacrificial arch, and like the transparent walls, the door seemed to be fashioned from a single ridiculous pane of glass.

Two docks stuck out into the lake, each floating on broad pontoons, each with a brand new serpenthouse alongside it.

Grand Gal was rubbing against the nearest house. Whistle saw the house bobbing unnaturally, then saw her head rise high, a single eye gazing through a window at whatever was inside.

They paddled for a moment, then with his softest voice, Whistle said, "Stop." He told Dabs, "Let's just drift in from here."

His wife's back was sweating, each of her raven tattoos glistening.

"The fish," he whispered. "Try it now."

She eased the salmon underwater.

"Move it back and forth," he advised.

"I am," she growled.

He ignored her voice, her mood. Sculling gently, he brought them closer, and when Grand Gal dipped her head, pressing against the serpenthouse once again, Whistle laid his paddle across the seats and reached for the bridle.

The water was laced with the salmon's flavor, and suddenly, with a wild slosh of foam, Grand Gal came at them, kicking with all of her body.

Almost too late, Whistle jumped to his feet and scrambled to the bow, the sliver boat rocking wildly and the bridle tangling in his hand. But Dabs yanked the bait from the water—an accidental blessing—and as the serpent's head broke the surface, Whistle opened the bridle enough that it opened itself the rest of the way, its bright hooks and the wide brass bit filled with enough magic to know where to land and how to hold tight.

For an instant, the reins threatened to slide free.

But Whistle grabbed and held on, feeling his feet leave the boat, the cold water slapping against his shoulder once, then harder, Grand Gal's momentum carrying both of them for several throws before she realized what she was doing, and that it was wrong.

Soaked, Whistle came to the surface, kicking and coughing until the serpent's back rose up to support his weight.

The great head turned and cloudy eyes regarded him for a long while, letting him read whichever emotion he wished to see in them.

Then a distant, almost quiet voice asked, "Are you all right?"

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Dabs' voice, he realized.

Whistle didn't respond. Instead, he let his considerable relief engulf him, and when he was absolutely sure that he had Grand Gal under control, he stood on her back and turned, finding Dabs coming up on his left.

"Never!" he roared.

She stopped paddling.

"You had no right to begin with," he assured her, "and I *never* want you to think that you have permission to take such a stupid, stupid risk again! Ever!"

He instantly regretted his words; they weren't harsh enough.

Dabs started to blurt something about being sorry.

He interrupted, shouting at her, "You're poor and ignorant, and you know nothing about serpents! Nothing!"

In an instant, her face turned to stone, and whatever apology she was about to utter dropped into the water between them, and vanished.

"Do I need a bridle for you?" he asked. "Do I?"

After a moment, Dabs muttered, "No." Then in a louder voice, "*That* won't be necessary."

"Good," he spat.

She picked up her paddle, and still sitting in the boat's narrow bow, started back for the mainland, crying as she flailed at the water, her strength winning out over her lack of experience and her obvious, delicious misery.

Whistle refused to follow.

Instead, he spoke to the old serpent, telling her that she had been bad even as he stroked her bristly mane and the sensitive, happy spot behind her jaw.

By then, Dabs was a glimmer about to be lost against the water's glare.

If he left now, he would still catch her. And not wanting to be anywhere near the woman, Whistle turned Grand Gal and coaxed her back toward the island. "A perfect time to meet our neighbors," he told her, and himself.

She didn't need any coaxing, of course.

They reached the dock, and Whistle climbed off and tied the reins to a shiny fat cleat. "Hello!" he called out. Loudly, but not shouting. When no one answered, he walked up to the serpenthouse and peeked into one of its big windows. There was room inside for three serpents, or more. The lone resident had a golden mane that looked like fire in the sunlight. Its head was craggy and broad, meaning it was male. Which explained why Grand Gal was so interested . . . something about her simple, harmless lusts making him smile fondly. . . .

He started for shore.

"Hello," he called out once again.

Again, no answer.

On any other day, Whistle would have left the island. He wouldn't have walked up the stone path, studying a yard and house that didn't belong to his family. In a different mood, he wouldn't have let his curiosity carry him along this way. But it was such a strange property. Lining the path were vases filled with, of all things, earth and blood-flowers. Hanging from the trees were various offerings, but instead of meat left for ravens, he saw glass tubes of brown grain meant for the littlest birds. What special magic did a sparrow possess? he wondered. And why would wealthy magicians bother with it? Then he stepped up to the entranceway, discovering two

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doors. He opened the outer glass door and found a heavy wooden one wearing a brass knocker on which was engraved a small, delicately rendered silhouette of a loon.

Twice, he used the knocker.

Then he tried his fist, rapping it against the wood. But still no one answered. He decided that he was alone on the island. Stepping off into an eruption of flowers beneath one of the tall windows, he put his hands up around his squinting eyes and peered inside.

The furniture looked complicated and soft.

The room's floor was paved with what might have been short grass, except it was a pale lifeless gray color. And hanging on the walls was a portrait of a woman, her face too narrow and delicate to be real, and just as strange, her chest hidden behind her clothes, and her visible skin dark and unmarred by even the tiniest tattoos.

Obviously these magicians were from some different place—from the ends of the world, probably—and they embraced a very different circle of customs and magic.

With a respectful bow, Whistle eased away from the window and house, then started back toward the dock.

That's when he felt eyes against the back of his neck.

When he turned, Whistle expected to find a face pressed against one of the giant windows. He even imagined seeing the strange face from the portrait. But there was nobody. Not a face, not an eye. Nothing. He took a deep breath and looked at every window carefully, and only when his head was tipped back did he finally notice the banner riding on a pole fixed to the highest part of the roof. It was strange that he hadn't noticed it before. But not too strange. Squinting, he realized that the banner was black-and-bone in color, and as the breeze shifted, it turned sideways to him, showing him the familiar image of a loon.

"Odd, odd, odd," he said to himself.

"Home," he told Grand Gal, straddling her back, both hands firmly on the reins.

By the time they pulled into the serpenthouse, Whistle was ready to apologize. He was beginning to feel sorry for what he had said, and in his mind, he practiced his speech and imagined Dabs' own heartfelt apologies. But where was the sliver boat? Once Grand Gal was safely tied up and the big steel-barred door was locked, he realized that the boat wasn't in its usual place, nor was it tied up against the dock.

Trying not to hurry, Whistle went up to the cabin and found it empty.

He returned to the dock and made a careful search. But the boat and paddles and even the life jackets were missing . . . as if Dabs had never made it back. . . .

She just went to the wrong cabin. She was probably drinking cold tea with Grandmother and Aunt Hope, suffering through a rambling conversation about nothing. That's what Whistle kept telling himself as he started down the trail toward the main cabin.

"There's nothing to worry about," he whispered under his breath.

He offered a little chant or two, hoping for good luck.

Then with a genuine surprise, he wondered why he was running now. And why, why had he started to sob. . . ?

Dabs was never found.

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Searchers never found the body or the missing boat, and a trusted shaman came to the lake and found no evidence of her spirit, either. But the bay had some very deep water, and Uncle Dactyl pointed out that someone's young serpent might have gotten loose and turned wild, and because it was small, nobody had found it yet.

"That kind of tragedy wouldn't be unheard-of," Uncle told Whistle. Then with a comforting pat to the shoulder, he added, "Or the girl is alive and quite happy now, too."

In other words, she had left him intentionally.

Because of one awful fight. . . .

If Dabs' family knew where she was, they didn't tell. They wept at the funeral and cut themselves in the right places, and Dabs' mother even tried to offer herself to the mortuary's overfed condors. Which made them either good actors inspired by the shame of the ruined marriage, or more likely, innocent people who accepted her death even without a body.

Whistle held different thoughts.

For the first year, his doubts remained secret, even to himself. But during his second year as widower, what he was thinking gained a voice and began to boil out of him without warning.

His parents tried matching him with several young women. In general, they came from better families than Dabs had, and they were attractive enough, and they weren't so afflicted with soft, inappropriate feelings. But he couldn't make himself agree to any marriage. Even when his father threatened to arrange a match and leave him no voice in the issue, Whistle grew defiant, warning everyone in earshot, "I will do what I want! And I don't want to do anything about this now. Is that understood?"

It was three summers after his wedding when Whistle returned to the lake.

Change had arrived before him. The-Dreams had been doing well in their new business ventures, manufacturing an array of fancy, completely artificial fabrics. There was enough money to pour some of it into the old buildings, and come autumn, a new dock and boathouse would be constructed near the honeymoon cabin.

In preparation for that day, the old serpenthouse and dock had been hoisted out of the water. Whistle had to scramble over a fence and up a ladder to walk one last time on those heavy planks. Grand Gal had passed away just last winter. Like so many old serpents, she had gone quietly while hibernating beneath the ice. Thinking of her and Dabs, Whistle found himself aching, and the pains only worsened when he stepped inside the serpenthouse, looking at that great cage of rusted bars, the rotting lines, and that heavy saddle that must have been horribly uncomfortable to carry on any back.

He stayed there until he heard the thrumming of a powerful motor.

A barge was working its way up the bay. The same old man was piloting it, but there was no sasquatch and no fish, either. He had come to collect their garbage and carry it to wherever it was burned or buried.

Whistle climbed down and met the old man at the trash cans. He introduced himself, and the old man looked at him with wide eyes. But then, Whistle was probably locally famous. Even notorious. A groom loses his bride during the honeymoon; that has to set every tongue wagging.

But the man called him "Good sir," just the same.

Then he busied himself with his labors.

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"What happened to your sasquatch?" Whistle asked.

"I sold him, sir. Last summer." Then as if he heard a complaint, he added, "The fellow was mine to sell, and I got a good price."

"That's a new motor on the barge," Whistle observed.

"New as new can be, nearly. And much quicker than that old motor."

Whistle noticed there wasn't any charmed bell to ward off the wind. "We won't even keep serpents here anymore," he mentioned. "What with the price of fish and how much fun the new boats can be."

"It's the same everywhere, sir. The same everywhere."

Looking out across the bay, it took Whistle a few moments to realize what was wrong. "What happened to the mansion? The magicians' place?"

The old man kept his head down, concentrating on the trash.

"It doesn't even look as if there was a building ever out there," Whistle continued, his heart beating faster now. Harder. And his breath coming in fast, deep gulps. "What happened to our neighbors?"

"They left," the old man offered.

"Obviously."

That word and its tone earned a look. The man's eyes lifted and fixed on Whistle for an instant, then dropped again.

"Those magicians flew some sort of banner." Whistle was speaking to himself as much as anyone, working at the problem the same as he had for the last three years. "And what's most odd, my uncle had an identical banner. There was a note attached to it warning me not to fly it. But it was flown. I think the note got misplaced, and my wife put it up the day she vanished. As it happens . . ."

The trash was loaded, but the old man just stood on his barge, saying nothing.

"Magic," said Whistle. "It can make a person do little things. And little things conspire until they become enormous events. Isn't that so?"

The old man just nodded, giving him a sad long look.

"She let the old serpent go free, and she put up the banner. And we went to that island, and had our only fight, and she left first. But she never made it back to here. Did she?"

Weakly, the man said, "No, sir."

"So who were those magicians?"

"I . . . I really shouldn't, sir. . . ."

"Oh, yes," Whistle replied. "You damn well better tell me everything you know. . . !"

The old face grew thoughtful, and even sadder. "There's different worlds. They overlap, sir, and they're all more alike than different." He paused, then continued. "These magicians . . . they're a different sort of us, I guess you'd say. I never saw them myself. I just heard things."

"Such as?"

"They've got magic beyond anything we know. Or can know." He shook his head. "They've got so much magic in their little fingers that there's billions of them in their world. Yes, sir. Billions. So many that all the great good beasts that we take for granted have been pushed out of theirs. They exist, if at all, as myth."

Whistle looked out at the island again, remembering the dark woman in the portrait.

"They came here," the old man admitted. "With a great magic, they came here to buy everything's that has vanished from their world. And to pay for

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those things, they gave us a few, a very few, of their fancy machines. Or for some of us, simple gold."

"What did you get for your sasquatch?"

"Ten times the gold that he's worth, sir."

"But you never actually saw them?"

"It was handled indirectly, good sir."

Whistle took a breath, then started to ask one question. But instead of what he expected to say, a different question trickled out of him.

"What are we to them? How do they see us?"

"As people. But an old, extinct line of people. . . ."

Whistle gasped.

"Cousins, if you will. Good sir."

Finally, in pain, Whistle had to ask, "What did they pay for my wife?"

"Why? Don't you know, sir?"

Whistle flinched, glancing at his fancy new shirt, slick and brightly colored and woven in his family's fancy new factory. Then he gasped as if knifed and gazed up at the empty serpenthouse, at all that heavy steel and those muscle-strained ropes, and in despair, he asked himself why it had taken him so long to see the house for what it was.

A cage.

Elaborate and beautiful, and at its heart, so perfectly cruel. . . . O

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Brian Stableford

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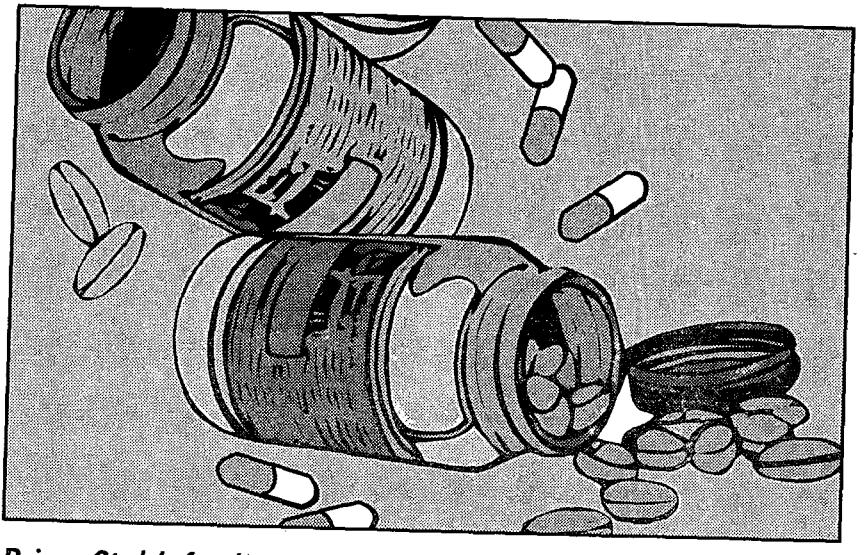

Brian Stableford's most recent works include the nonfiction books, *Yesterday's Bestsellers* and *Glorious Perversity: The Decline and Fall of Literary Decadence* (both from Borgo Press, 1998), and the novel, *Inherit the Earth*, which was published by Tor last September. In addition to his fiction, Mr. Stableford is a prolific writer about the history of imaginative literature. He is a contributor to *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993), *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), *The St James Guide to Fantasy Writers* (1996), and the *St James Guide to Horror, Ghost and Gothic Writers* (1997). He also worked with David Pringle on *The Ultimate Science Fiction Encyclopedia* and the forthcoming *Ultimate Fantasy Encyclopedia*.

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Caxton awoke to find the Special Branch men going through his drawers with meticulous efficiency. There was no fuss. They flashed their badges, and told him to get up. They waited while he got dressed, watching him like hawks in case he had any more pills hidden away—they'd already confiscated the bottles they'd found on the bedside table. Then they took him downstairs and thrust him into the back of a black BMW.

No one was around to witness his ignominious departure. He knew that someone had given him up, but he had no idea who it might be. He had only been hitting the bookmaker for a couple of weeks, taking out no more than he needed for food and to pay off his connection, but all bookies were paranoid and they probably circulated closed-circuit TV pictures of suspected cheats, so it was as likely to be the bookie as anyone else.

He was still trying to rub the sleep from his eyes when the car pulled out into the traffic, and it wasn't until he felt the thrust of the acceleration that the knowledge that it was over actually took hold. The sudden jolt of nausea made him swallow hard, although the dryness of his mouth made it chokingly difficult. He had always found that the moment when awful possibility flipped over into horrible certainty was the most difficult to bear of all *waking* moments.

In a fair world, the pain of such catastrophes would have been exactly counterbalanced by the joy of their converse, but Caxton had always found that the reward of hopeful expectation blossoming into blessed relief was meager by comparison. In the days when he had talked to others of his rare and allegedly precious kind, they had agreed with him. One had quoted Schopenhauer, to the effect that anyone who thought that good and evil were balanced out in the course of the world's affairs should ask himself whether the hawk's joy in the kill could be considered equal to its inevitable counterpart, the death-agony of the mouse.

The doctors and scientists had disagreed, of course, but that was what they were paid to do. Theirs was a paradoxical position, which insisted that they sought the truth only in the observations of others, preserving their objectivity while limiting their sight. They were honor- and salary-bound to refrain from the kind of cynicism that lucid dreamers couldn't possibly avoid.

Caxton knew better than to become angry with himself for drugging himself into unconsciousness the previous evening instead of going fishing in his dreams. Even if he'd caught a glimpse of the arrest, he wouldn't have guessed its significance. It was more than likely that he would have been concentrating far too hard on the horses, and the vexatious business of trying to separate the actual runners from the phantom horses of the apocalypse, to pay any attention at all to warnings of his own impending doom. It wasn't as if such warnings had ever been in short supply.

The plainclothesmen took him to the local police station first, because they had to maintain the fiction that his arrest was a matter of the everyday business of law and order. No matter how unjust or futile his arrest might be, it all had to be done by the book. They made every effort to set his uppers and downers down on the custody sergeant's desk as if the pills were proof of some heinous wrongdoing, but they couldn't fake any serious indignation.

"I need those," Caxton told them, quietly. "I didn't have time to take one before I was arrested. If I don't have a wake-up pill I'll be in no condition to

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be questioned." They didn't care. It wasn't their job to cross-examine him; they were just the delivery men.

"You won't be here long," the sergeant assured him. "The Therapy Center in Maidenhead will send someone to pick you up within the hour. I'll have to take your belt and shoelaces."

Caxton looked down at the grey laces in his Hi-Tec sneakers, wondering whether it would really be possible for a man to hang himself with anything so slim and frayed. He shook his head, but he knelt down meekly enough, and slowly began to unthread the offending objects from the network of plastic loops.

"Way back in the last century," Caxton said, because it was obvious that no one else felt like making conversation, "Adolf Hitler sent the Gestapo out to arrest all the astrologers in Berlin. I can't remember why—maybe just one of those little whims dictators have. Not a single one had his bags packed and ready. We all used to laugh at that back at the Bolton Center, in the early days—as if it were absolute proof that the astrologers were mere charlatans, who could no more see the future than fly. Did it ever occur to you that if I were *actually* of any use—to the Millennium Commission, to humankind, or even to myself—you wouldn't ever have been able to *catch* me?"

None of them rose to the bait. They were only following orders. It wasn't their job to question the philosophy of the project or the powers of the Commission. They weren't the Gestapo, though; once he was safely deposited in the cell, a uniformed constable brought him some tea in a Styrofoam cup. He felt badly in need of the liquid, but he would have preferred strong black coffee. Caffeine wasn't speed, but it was better than nothing.

"I was never a big winner," Caxton said, as he accepted the gift with as much gratitude as he could muster. "No sixty-six-to-one shots. No clever Yankees. I always moved on after a couple of months, to spread the pain. Mr. Hill and Mr. Ladbroke could have supported a dozen like me and never even noticed."

"Was it worth it?" the young constable asked, lingering by the cell door.

Caxton hadn't been expecting that one. "Worth it?" he echoed, helplessly.

"The kind of life you've had to lead," the policeman said, his bright blue eyes peering through the slit with frank curiosity. "Stumbling around from town to town, trying not to attract attention. Why bother? Why not simply do your duty, like any other honest superman?"

Duty! Caxton let the word echo silently in his aching skull. *Is that what it is?* "I'm not a superman," he muttered, thickly. He meant it. Whatever the Bolton Dream Therapy Center had made of him, and whatever the Millennium Commission wanted from him, he was morally certain that he was no less a prisoner of fate than anyone else. The only difference was that he could *see* the nightmarish decorations on the walls that surrounded the narrow realm of human choice. He was better than most at measuring the dimensions of the slit in the solid steel door marked FUTURE, but he was no closer than anyone else to finding the key that would open it from the inside.

"But you *did* win, didn't you?" the young constable pointed out, extending his hand through the slit to accept the cup Caxton had drained to the dark dregs. "Not millions, maybe—but you did win. You *can* see into the future."

Caxton shook his head, but he didn't try to explain. That was what every-

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one thought, and not just because of the way the tabloids had reported the original breakthrough. People assumed that it was all so *straightforward*. You take the drug, you see the future, you make your fortune reading the race results or the lottery numbers in tomorrow's paper—or you could if there weren't more important things to do, more important things to *see*: important things on which an *honest* superman had a moral duty to concentrate, not just for the good of the tax-funded Project but for the good of all mankind.

There was a *righteousness* about the way the constable closed the slit on him, Caxton thought. Like the world-weary men from Special Branch and the custody sergeant, the young constable thought that he fully deserved to be banged up—for life, if necessary. There was a *job* to be done, a problem to be solved, a world to be saved, and it was *his* job, *his* problem, *his duty*. According to the world, he wasn't Simple Simon Caxton; he was Mighty Joe Hope, lurking at the bottom of Pandora's Box: the world's only ward against the looming cloud of evil that might be a stray asteroid, or a new Great Plague, or World War III, or any damn thing at all that could bring civilization down like a house of cards.

Other people never could or would understand that whatever power the drug had imported to his ragged, wretched mind, he was still just like them in the only respect that really mattered. No matter how much he learned to see, there was no *escape*.

Caxton had no idea—and nor did anyone else, so far as he knew—whether the fact that he'd sometimes, albeit very rarely, contrived to falsify his own sibylline prophecies meant that the future really could be shaped to the whims of humankind. Perhaps those particular anticipations had been of a special kind, concerned with matters irrelevant to the grim dictatorship of Destiny.

"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars," he quoted, silently, *"but in ourselves, that we are underlings." Or maybe not. Maybe this time, I'll get to find out.* He didn't believe it. No first-rate miracles had been worked in Bolton; he didn't have the least inkling that Maidenhead would be any different. All he could feel was the horrid insistence of a galloping future that had nothing in it for him but the prospect of being trampled and torn apart. His lucid dreams were government property again, until the day came when the oh-so-lucid nightmares ate up his mind entirely and condemned him to oblivion—or until the end of the world, if that were really as imminent as everyone feared.

Caxton expected his first session with the Maidenhead dream doctors to be uncomfortable, but not because he'd dreamed it in advance. It was only logic that told him so: the same faculty of rational calculation that everyone had. He didn't suppose there would be anyone there that he knew, but logic and anxiety alike promised him the same old faces, staring at him with hurt and accusative expressions, and voices, plaintively asking him *why*. Rational calculation suggested that they would do their level best to make him feel guilty about his defection, his dereliction of *duty*—and he couldn't see any reason why they wouldn't succeed.

It turned out, however, that they had decided to use different tactics. Rational calculation had failed him, just as it routinely failed everyone. Why, otherwise, would the Dream Therapy Centers ever have been set up?

There was only one doctor waiting for him when the burly nurse escorted

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him from his room, and she was anything but intimidating. She was in her mid-twenties, not quite young enough to be his daughter, although he didn't doubt that she was fully qualified. She was also exceptionally pretty, in a *tidy* sort of way; the powers-that-be had obviously figured that he needed to be *seduced* back into the fold.

In a way, he'd have preferred them to use tougher tactics; that might have roused him to resentment, and eventually to dissent, maybe so annoyingly as to give him back the capacity to care.

The first thing the doctor did, after introducing herself as Susan Drayling, was to hand him a plastic bottle containing seven pills. The label said that they were valium, but he wasn't quite ready to believe it.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" he said.

"I think you're scared," she countered, "and I think you've every right to be. They're to help you past the withdrawal symptoms, give you time to adjust. We'll monitor your progress very carefully, to make sure that it's safe to put you back on the lucidity-stimulant. When we think it's safe, we'll tell you exactly what we intend to do and how. The principle of informed consent still applies here."

Caxton suppressed a laugh. "I was brought to the Center in handcuffs," he pointed out. "The guy who brought me from my room looks like an all-in wrestler. Where's the *consent* in any of it?."

"You *did* volunteer, in the beginning," she told him. The softness of her voice seemed to Caxton to be carefully calculated and thoroughly professional. "You signed up for the duration. All the Commission wants to do is hold you to the deal you made, and that's all it's entitled to do. Nobody will try to force the stimulant down your throat or sneak it into your food—but we'll do everything we can to persuade you to cooperate. You understand as well as I do how necessary that is, don't you? You understand exactly why we have to ask you to take the risk, and exactly why you ought to agree. You're not stupid, Simon, and you know how good you were. This Center never found one to match you—nor did Ashford or Haywards Heath."

"If I were any good at all," Caxton said, knowing that the ploy wasn't going to work, "they'd never have caught up with me, would they?"

"Perhaps, subconsciously, you *wanted* to be caught," Susan Drayling suggested, arching a neatly shaped eyebrow. "Perhaps you simply recognized the inevitability of it. Those are among the possibilities I'd like to explore, at any rate. The Bolton people were very disappointed when you ran away, of course, but they always saw it as an opportunity as well as a nuisance—an opportunity to cultivate a better understanding of the psychology of precognition. We're doubly glad to have you back, Simon."

She smiled, winningly.

Caxton tried to see the smile for what it was—a *professional* smile, fully laden with hypocrisy—but he could feel himself melting under its pressure. He hadn't seen many smiles recently, and none of the ones he had seen had been directed at him.

"I need *real* downers, and uppers too," he told her. "Barbs to suppress the night-visitors, speed to keep me from napping by day. Valium's no use at all."

"No amphetamines or barbiturates," she said. "These will let you down as gently as I dare; when they're gone, I won't be issuing any more." She must have known that abrupt withdrawal from the amphetamines would cause worse problems than mere valium could solve, even without the complicat-

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ing factor of the barbiturates he'd been swallowing three and four at a time, but Caxton could see that she wasn't going to help him out.

"This is torture," he complained. "Plain and simple—and it's all for nothing. It's cruel, and it's pointless."

"Are you casting yourself as a witch or a martyr?" she asked, tartly.

"A heretic," Caxton retorted.

She raised a challenging eyebrow. "And what, exactly, is your heresy?"

"I'm a devout Hartmannist," he told her.

Susan Drayling was, of course, perfectly familiar with the so-called Hartmann Conjecture—which suggested that the whole Dream Therapy project had been a stupid, pathetic, misconceived, and misguided waste of time—but mention of it only caused her to reinstate her professional smile.

"So you've been keeping up with the literature while you've been on the run," she parried. "That's good. We need you to understand the possibilities, to approach your own experiences in an informed way. I'd like to make sure that we're talking about the same thing, though—would you mind telling me exactly what you understand the Hartmann Conjecture to be?"

Caxton had to concede that she was slick. "I've had to do my reading in public libraries," he said, in a mock-apologetic tone, "so I've only seen the secondary accounts in *New Scientist*—but I flatter myself that I understood the implications of what I was reading better than most. Hartmann accepts that what you call the *lucidity-stimulant* really does equip a significant minority of the test subjects with a limited, if curiously perverse, ability to obtain true knowledge of the future—but he thinks that the universality of the apocalyptic premonitions experienced by the seers shouldn't be taken as proof of the fact that the world really is in terrible danger. He thinks that the desperate and costly attempts currently being made to obtain a clearer picture of the threat are probably futile. He thinks that the visions of the end that trouble the best of us so deeply are simply an amplification of existential *angst*: that our fearful consciousness of the inevitability of our own deaths is being exaggerated by the stimulant, to the extent that our attempts to bring quotidian events into focus are overwhelmed by a sense of personal hopelessness. That's what we *mistake* for a teasing vision of the impending end of the world."

Susan Drayling waited for a few seconds before replying, as if she couldn't quite decide which strategy would work best on a patient willing and able to deploy words like *quotidian*. In the end, she kept it brutally simple. "Do you think he's right?" she asked.

"I don't know," Caxton replied, with bitter honesty. "It seems to me, trying to sort through my most recent nightmares, that I'm fucked either way. Whether the dread is purely mine or the whole world's, it's driving me down so hard that I can't get up again. You probably know better than I do what my physical condition is, but if you're going to tell me that there's nothing actually *wrong* with me, I'm not going to believe you. The more terrifying dream-sleep becomes and the more urgent its omens are, the less I can do when I wake—and I can't see any way back. You're right, Doctor Drayling, about my being able to understand how much it matters to *you* to be able to figure out whether people like me are really seeing the end of the world or merely falling under the spell of our own idiot paranoia—but I hope *you* can understand when I tell you that if you're so fucking desperate to figure it out, you ought to do it the hard way. Why waste time chasing lapsed volunteers when you can replace them so easily simply by volunteering yourself?"

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"As a matter of fact," she said, mildly, "two of the research-workers who were working with you in Bolton before you decided to take your little holiday did exactly that. Peter Morden never got past the first round of tests, but Janice Carlyle showed better-than-average sensitivity. She's doing well—but someone has to stay on the other side of the needle, Simon. Someone has to observe, to analyze, to weigh things up objectively. Even if the likelihood that the threat is real were far more remote than it is, we'd still have to maintain the investigation. While there's a possibility that the world really *is* facing an apocalyptic threat, and a possibility, however slim, that people like you and Janice might be able to figure out when and how in time for us to save lives, we have to keep the project going."

"What do *you* believe, Doctor Drayling?" Caxton wanted to know. "Do *you* believe that it's worth driving people out of their minds, in the faint hope that they might be able to tell you something useful about a threat which may not actually be real at all?"

"I'm a scientist," she said. "My role is to set aside the temptations of belief, to read the facts without prejudice, to try to figure out *the truth*."

Caxton finally condescended to pick up the bottle of pills that she'd set down in front of him.

"The truth," he said, "is that I can't help you. The truth is that I can't even help *myself*. I've had all the stimulation I can take, and then some."

"I can't accept that," said the tidy, porcelain-pretty woman who wasn't quite young enough to be his daughter.

"I know," he murmured. That was his problem. He *knew* that certain things were simply inescapable. Sleep was one of them, and dreams were another—and since the drug had turned him into whatever he now was, the *memory* of his dreams was inescapable too.

He took two valium that evening, but they didn't help calm his frayed nerves, which were already giving him hell. The only good effect of having to come off the uppers was that sleep was out of the question, tranquilizers or no tranquilizers—but he'd learned long ago that you didn't actually have to fall asleep to experience delirium, and that delirium carried its fair share of what modern scientists had chosen to call *lucidity*.

Every time the delirium came upon him, he tried to snatch himself awake, but every time he snatched himself awake, he only set himself up for the next lapse.

It did no good to look away from the horses, even though he knew that he couldn't use any names they might whisper in his ear. Concentrating on anything *but* the horses was, in the final analysis, exactly the same as concentrating *on* the horses, except that his imbecilically lucid mind dressed the warnings up in other symbols. He knew all the while that they were only symbols, not real rains of fire or opening abysses or tidal waves or screaming, panicking crowds, but that didn't make them easier to bear. Somewhere among that dreadful crowd of symbols there *were* items of crude literality, mere brute facts of one kind and another, which could even be seen for what they were now and again. They might be deceptive in themselves, or siren songs which led him to error, but it did no good to increase his efforts to sort out fact from fiction. Whenever he tried that, the images became so much more clamorous, so much more agonizing, so much more terrifying, that the only thing he was capable of wanting, more powerful than the desire to live, was that it should all be fantasy, all unreal, all a mere delusion. . . .

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Unfortunately, he thought, as he roused himself for the fifth or sixth time, and almost immediately felt himself relapsing into the same victimized state, he had told Susan Drayling the truth. However much it mattered to her, it didn't actually matter a damn *to him* whether it was fantasy or not.

The dream-episodes grew worse as the night went on. He found himself insisting, with absurd urgency, that the pit of fire had never opened up beneath Sodom and Gomorrah, that the asteroid had never blasted the dinosaurs to extinction, and there had never been any such things as death camps, or nuclear winters, or mad dictators, or hydrogen bombs, or plague wars, or alien invasions, and that the sun had never exploded at all, or even ignited in the first place. . . .

He tried with all his might to concentrate on the most trivial thing he could find or imagine, even though there wasn't any point in doing that any more, now that he wasn't free to place a bet. It didn't work. Now that he was locked up with his dreams and his duty, and had nothing to do with himself or his life but put the two together and face the horror, he could find no relief in trying to sort out the real horses from those ridden by the horsemen of the Apocalypse.

By the time dawn arrived, he was convinced that the sickness eating away at his bowels like cancer actually *was* cancer—and that even if it wasn't, it was something *else* that would neither let him rest nor live, and would show no mercy to him, or to anyone at all, or even any*thing* at all, while it ate up space and time themselves and all the meaning that was in them.

Like acid or the alkahest, irresistible in a universe in which immovability was inconceivable—a universe that had been given over to many-numbered beasts with thousands of heads, in which there would be no more sea or anything at all—the symptoms of his withdrawal ate away at his soul, corrupting everything they dissolved.

He wished that he were a martyr, instead of a devout and committed heretic, so that he might have something to suffer *for*.

Caxton had always had nightmares, of course. That was what had made him volunteer for the project in the first place.

He had never been under the delusion that the drugs they gave him at the Bolton Center would make the nightmares go away—his consent had been informed at least to that extent—but he'd been foolish enough to think that making them more focused by making the dreaming process more lucid *might* be the next best thing.

He'd even been quixotic enough, then to think that if something *good* could be made to come out of his nightmares, then, all the distress they'd caused him in childhood might somehow become *worthwhile*. At first, he really had been prepared to accept martyrdom.

Now, looking back with a sensibility educated by the likes of Susan Drayling, he could see that really—not even subconsciously—he'd just been trying to get back at his father. Mum had always been sympathetic, but Dad had considered it his parental duty to "nip the problem in the bud." Dad had told him to shut up about his bloody nightmares, because they were only bloody dreams and he'd have to bloody live with them like everybloodybody else, and whenever he *hadn't* shut up quickly enough, Dad had been more than ready to reinforce the lesson with a smack in the head.

Caxton had learned quickly enough to keep his mouth shut, but he'd nev-

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er learned to forgive. Now, he wondered whether Dad might have had to learn to live with nightmares of his own; nightmares that obviously hadn't given him the ability to pick winning horses, but which might well have been instrumental in giving him the mother of all bad tempers.

Oddly enough, Jack Caxton had never realized the irony of the fact that his favorite word was "bloody."

On the second day of his new imprisonment, the distressed Caxton confided all of this to Susan Drayling. He had no reason to keep it secret, and he figured that she might well be interested to hear it, but his real reason for doing so was the hope that it might win him some sympathy, and maybe a pill with a bit more clout than the three valium he still had in reserve. He'd taken another two with his breakfast, unable to face the day without them.

It didn't work, of course, but he felt that he had to try.

"Pity the old bastard died so young," Caxton observed. "He'd probably be a lot better at this than I'm supposed to be. On the other hand, maybe the bloody stimulant would have blown that dodgy vessel in his brain as soon as it got into his bloodstream. How many of the people who've died while taking the drug have gone the same way he did?"

"The lucidity-stimulant did increase the risk of cerebral hemorrhage in the early days," Susan Drayling admitted, too neat in her habits to tell an *easy* lie, "but the beta-blockers seem to have taken care of it. You don't have to be afraid of strokes, Simon. Once you've kicked the bad stuff, we'll give you the medication you *really* need."

"That all depends what you mean by *have to be* and *really need,* Doctor Drayling," Caxton told her. "There's a sense in which Dad didn't *have to be* afraid of anything, but it was precisely for that reason that the fear he couldn't ever shake off made him hate himself—and everybody else. As to deciding what he *really needed,* I don't think beta-blockers would have been on his list *or* mine."

"But you're not like your father, Simon," she pointed out, as any shrink would have been bound to do. "You're different. You see more clearly than he ever did—more clearly than he ever could have done. You've never turned your anxieties into violence. You can *control* it. You can *focus.* It's just a matter of choosing to focus on something a little less trivial than the racing results. We can help you, Simon—we've learned quite a lot since you went off on your little spree."

"So have I," Caxton said, gritting his teeth. "And the most vital thing I've learned is that triviality is *good*—and not just because it pays a dividend at the bookies. That's the least of it, Doctor Drayling. Believe me, trivial is best. There are some things that man was never meant to bring into focus."

"You don't believe that," she retorted. "You're too intelligent. But I'd be very interested to hear about your private experiments, so that I could make up my own mind about what there might be to be learned from them."

"I don't like to talk about it," Caxton said. "When I talk about those sorts of things, I think about them too, and when I start to think about them, I start having bad dreams. Being here isn't good for me, Doctor Drayling. Just *being here* is making things worse, even without the uppers and the downers, and the more you make me talk, the worse it will get. You're killing me, Doctor Drayling. You don't even need to stick me with the kind of needle you're itching to use. *This* is enough."

"I think you're over-reacting," she told him, sternly.

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"It was my dad who was *over-reacting*," he countered, stubbornly. "The ones who *over-react* are the ones who die and the ones who kill themselves and the ones who simply lose their minds. At the moment, I'm not *over-reacting* at all—but I don't know how long I can hold on before I *start* going into overdrive, one way or the other. One hit of the loo-juice is all it would take to make it instantaneous. Believe me, Doctor, I'm burned out as a prophet. You could save my life with the right prescription, but if you don't let me have what I need, I'm gone."

"And yet," she pointed out, "you condescended to be found. Your unconscious screened out news of your own impending capture. After all this time, you let your guard down, and *let* us bring you back into the program. That was no simple misfortune, Simon. People like you don't experience simple misfortunes. What was it, do you suppose? A death wish?"

"Sometimes," he told her, knowing full well that she already knew it, "we see things clearly, but can't lift a finger to prevent them. The dreams are our masters, not our slaves. They don't give *us* godlike powers, Doctor Drayling—they *are* godlike powers, in their own right. They drive us mad, and they kill us for their sport, and if they don't want the world to be saved, they won't ever give us the means to save it. I don't think it matters whether or not I can get past these withdrawal symptoms, Doctor, and I'm absolutely certain that I don't need any more of your fucking *stimulant*. My mind is all set to blow already, and the only reason the police caught up with me is that there's absolutely nothing left for me to gain by continuing to run. It's over, and I know it. I *know* it—and you can't deny it. *I'm* the one who can see into the future, after all!"

Susan Drayling was studying him very carefully indeed, but not in a way that made him feel like a bug on a microscope slide. She was good at her job, Caxton had to admit, but she wasn't good *enough*. Nobody was. "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord," he said, when he realized that she was waiting for him to continue, as if he were merely blowing off steam. "He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. Any day now, any way now, I shall be released."

"You wouldn't care to put a date on that, I suppose?" she said, lightly.

Caxton didn't like being humored, but he wasn't about to turn into his father. He made an effort to smile, hoping the result didn't look too contrived. "I'm with Hartmann, remember," he reminded her. "I left Bolton because I couldn't continue to believe—or even to hope—that I was a bit-player in some countdown movie in which the world's most photogenic psychics would come together just in time to stop the sword of Damocles in mid-fall. I don't believe that my nightmares are of any relevance to anyone but *myself*. I'm no use to you, Doctor Drayling—no use at all."

"If you're scared of cerebral hemorrhage . . . " she began, speaking very softly and reassuringly.

"Nothing so specific," he countered. "Statistically, of course, suicide is far more likely—anyone who reads *New Scientist* knows that. What did they use to say back in the old days? *While the balance of the mind was disturbed.*"

"But *you* didn't kill yourself, did you?" she said. "You let them bring you back. That makes you a far better judge than most people as to the best way to utter a cry for help. I think we can help you, Simon. I really do."

"You're wrong," he told her, flatly—but he knew that he couldn't be certain of that. He was confident that he knew himself better than anyone else

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did, but he also knew that if you doubled next-to-nothing, you still wouldn't have very much.

That night, he took all three of the remaining capsules, because he *knew* that one wouldn't be enough and that there was no point in taking two and only holding on to one. They'd be more likely to give him more if he had none at all, if there was any possibility that they'd humor him to that extent. He knew that he was hastening toward his end, but he'd told the simple truth when he told his pretty doctor that the dreams were his master, and that the power they exercised over him was godlike in its irresistibility.

He knew that when he woke up again, he'd regret what he'd done, but he was past caring about that. People like him had no alternative but to take each dream as it came.

This time, he couldn't entirely avoid sleep, but his periods of sleep were no more extended than the periods of waking delirium he'd experienced the night before. The only effect of their being real sleep was to make the periods in between less distinct, more nightmarish in their own right. From time to time, he tried to talk himself awake, but it didn't work; even talk could be absorbed into the delirium, dissolved into a half-coherent stew of images and ideas.

"Three pills ought to make it earth or water," he chided himself, as resentment sliced his less-than-astral body like a serrated knife, "but if it has to be air and fire, it has to be air and fire, and what difference does it make, given that there are far more ways to die than ancient elements—or even modern elements? Every single one of them can fill a crowd with dread and weeping, and you have to concentrate anyhow in the hope of screening something out, even if it means bringing something else into much sharper focus that will be just as bad.

"If you don't try at all, stupid habit will simply take over, and you'll see those stupid horses bearing down on you again, with the whip-wielding skeletons laughing like crazy. Even if you don't try to figure out the names, they'll tell you names anyway, if only names like War and Plague and Famine and Death, except that this has *never* been a four-horse race, because that was only ever a brutal simplification, an expression of poetic license employed by dreamers who never understood how lucky they were to *have* a poetic license."

In the past, he knew, dreamers had been so stupid as to wish that they could see *more,* and see it more *lucidly.* They hadn't had the opportunity to realize that there was no Hell deeper or more fiery than the Hell of knowledge and lucidity: the Hell of stimulated dreams; the Hell of *knowing* that the End was Nigh, that the Apocalypse was Now, and that the future was even more crowded with ague and anguish than the plaguey present or the petrified past.

"Dreamers of old would have put out their eyes rather than see *this,* or *that,*" he muttered, biting his bleeding lips, "or try to put a name to the *Thing* that was even now reaching out to them, or try to put a time to the moment when the air and fire would seize upon *you.* Dreamers of old never knew how lucky they *were* not to see the Thing that would rip you apart and squeeze you into a cinder, blow you away and burn you up, and hide its face all the while—and *challenge* you to try to see it, to try to concentrate, because it *knew,* as *you* knew, and every other lucid dreamer in the world *had*

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to know, that nothing was or is or ever will be more terrifying than knowledge, than truth, than sleep."

He knew, even as he said it all, that it made no sense and couldn't be true. But he knew, too, that there was truth *in* his dreaming, that he and those like him really were *the oracle*. . . .

"Fair enough," Susan Drayling replied; equably, as she watched him sweat and squirm with her vilely clinical eye. "Let's leave personal matters aside, by all means. Let's keep it strictly objective, scientific. On the basis of *all* the publicly available evidence, what do you think is happening, Simon? What kind of apocalypse do you think we're most likely to be facing? *Is* it the Book of Revelations, or something from science fiction?"

It was more trailing bait. *Just forget your dreams and focus on the evidence.* As if!

"It's definitely something from science fiction," Caxton said, with all the sarcasm he could muster from the raiment of his distress. "Back in the days of Saint John, the collective unconscious was way too strong to let the celestial dreamers through. Everyone was a psychic island in those days. It's only within the last hundred years that the walls of darkness have been properly breached. The celestial dreamers aren't doing it on purpose, of course—they're just the innocent alien inhabitants of all the worlds of all the stars, locked into their blissful communion. If they were ever individuals, they lost their individuality eons ago, just as we'll lose *ours*. I can't put a date on it because it won't happen all at once. I could go tomorrow or the day after, but *you'll* probably last ten or twenty years, maybe thirty. You'll probably outlast the infrastructure of society and all its desperate excrescences: the MC, the Samaritans, the DTCs, His Majesty's Government, the UN, the churches. The very last thing *you'll* learn is that *you can't change a thing*. Believe me, Doctor Susan Drayling. *I know*."

She nodded gravely, as if she'd learned a lot instead of sweet fuck all—as if he were talking sense instead of arrant nonsense. That was the trouble with shrinks, he thought. They tolerated far too much.

She pointed at the empty bottle in his hand and said: "You were only supposed to take one last night and one this morning. We trusted you to do that."

"If you simply wanted to wean me off them, you'd have doled them out two by two, then one by one," Simon countered, knowing that he was right. "You gave me seven at once to make a point—and to shift the blame. This way, you get me off them all the sooner and you get to make out that it's all *my* fault. If you weren't desperate, you wouldn't be resorting to games like that."

"We *do* feel a certain sense of urgency," she admitted. "Don't you?"

"Believe me, Doctor Drayling," he said, wishing that he could muster a flicker of lust at the sight of her, or a flicker of *anything* but gut-wrenching nausea, "you haven't the slightest idea what a *sense of urgency* is."

"If you can give us more," she said, "we'll consider giving *you* more valium. One at a time, to begin with—two if you can give us something *good*, something *solid*."

"From anyone but a fully qualified doctor," Caxton observed, sickly, "that would sound like crude blackmail."

"What choice have we got?" she said.

"What choice does *any* of us have?" he countered. He knew that his tac-

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tics were at fault. He knew that he ought to pretend to be cooperative. He knew that he ought to feed her something that *looked* solid, that *looked* good. He knew that he ought to try to string her along, play the game the only way it *could* be played—but knowing wasn't enough. Even when knowing was too much, it wasn't enough.

"And if I *don't* come through tomorrow," he said, not couching it as a question, "you'll start giving me the stuff again. Even though you know it will kill me, one way or another."

"We don't want to harm you," she said. It was true, but it wasn't enough. Even when the truth was too much, it wasn't enough. She had the dose all ready; he knew that she'd have the needle in his arm right now if the case conference had decided that was the way to go. She was just a puppet, like him—a puppet dancing to a tune she couldn't hum.

"If I could help you," he said, truthfully, "I would."

"We'll talk again tomorrow," she promised. "You really do have to get past this awful *shakiness*. One way or another, you have to get through it, and we can't just keep filling you up with valium. We really do want you to get well, so that you can get back into the program. Tomorrow, you'll feel better. I'm sure you'll make more sense when you do."

Caxton didn't know whether that was true or not, and the fact that he didn't know was almost as terrifying as the knowledge would have been—and the only thing more terrifying than that was the awful inevitability of sleep.

When night finally fell, after an absurdly long and troubled time, Caxton didn't try very hard to fight sleep. He continued to look at the TV, although he wasn't capable of actually watching it, until two in the morning, but that was as far as he could go.

He had heard of people in situations not unlike his who had punched the wall for hours on end, people who had ripped gasping wounds in their own flesh, but he had never heard of anyone who'd stayed awake forever, and he *had* heard of people who'd begun to dream continuously and inescapably anyway, just as lucidly as they would have done had they actually fallen asleep.

Without the killing power of the barbiturates, without even the futile soothing of the valium, he was lost. It was as simple as that. The power of the pills was *killing power*. The dreams were alive: alien visitations requiring the intervention of a bug-exterminator. In the beginning, Caxton had wondered whether they might somehow be *domesticated*—tamed as pets or confined as battery hens—but he was sure now that they were irredeemably wild, that they never would lay their nuggets of information regularly and cleanly. In an ideal world, he'd be able to get up every morning at the same hour as normal people, with all the day's racing results neatly filed away and nothing horrible to confuse them—but in an *ideal* world, the universe of stars wouldn't be filled with alien dreamers whose insidious assaults were gradually breaking through the protective walls of the human collective unconscious, destroying the souls that made people into people instead of anonymous molecules of mind in the great undifferentiated ocean of the Cosmic Mind.

Not that I really believe any of that crap, he told himself, as he lay in the dark, staring into nothingness, *any more than I believe that the last trump is about to sound, so that the dead might rise from their graves and form an*

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orderly queue before the Seat of Judgment. It's all fantasy, invented in the hope of making sense of the nonsensical, explaining the inexplicable, making the unthinkable thinkable.

Eventually, no matter that he had no barbs to help him, he drifted off to sleep. The only difference was that he couldn't avoid the dangerous layers and dive straight into oblivion. Instead, he was eerily half-conscious of the whole process: every sliding step of it. He felt and saw the oracular dreams arrive to claim him.

He dreamed, as he always had, of terror.

That was, at the end of the day, the whole of it. What he *saw* didn't really matter at all, even that tiny fraction of what he saw that was potentially capable of refinement into fleeting glimpses of the facts of the future. All that mattered, really, was what he *felt*—because he was, in essence, and like every other human on Earth, a man of *feeling*.

What he felt was terror, pure and simple.

All that the future had ever held, beyond the few fugitive glimpses that had provided him with his perversely precarious and conscientiously marginal living, was the threat of extinction. Given that, what else mattered? Given that, what was the point of confining him, of trying every means that existed, fair or foul, in the stupid and utterly vain hope that there might be something lurking at the bottom of his private Pandora's Box that could cancel out all the overlaying hosts of troubles?

He slept, but he slept *badly*—and he knew that it could only get worse. He knew, too, that the doctors would do everything they could to prevent him from killing himself—and he knew that they would succeed.

In his next session with Susan Drayling, he answered all her questions truthfully, on the assumption that if his nights were doomed to get worse and worse he might as well do what he could to make his days as easy as possible. He gave her a list of winning horses, but he warned her not to start playing the Oedipus game.

"You can ring up all the trainers and instruct them to withdraw the runners," he told her, "or you can have the bloody things shot as they come round the final bend, just to prove that destiny isn't implacable—but if you do that, I'm a vegetable. Anything you alter rebounds on me; anything *substantial* will set off a bomb in my brain. *Et tu, Brute.*"

"That's not what you said before," Doctor Drayling pointed out. "You said that nothing could be changed."

"I said that *I* couldn't change anything, and that *you* couldn't either. Bomb-blasts aren't selective, Dr. Drayling. Take my advice—if you want to be here tomorrow, make sure that what will be will be. Bet, by all means, but bet modestly. I suppose you know how I killed my father?"

"I know how you *think* you killed him," she admitted. "It was a stroke like any other stroke. It might not have been the fact that he was trying to prevent your vision coming true. It could have been a coincidence."

"So could the winning horses. So could everything that persuaded the Millennium Commission to take precognition seriously. If you doubt me, all you have to do is try to make sure that one of those horses doesn't get to post."

She put the list away in a drawer.

"We don't want to hurt you," she said, by way of reassurance rather than threat, "but we have to do everything we can to make use of your ability. We

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can't just sit back and let the world end without trying to prevent it, can we?" Her last comment was almost plaintive. Caxton saw that she knew full well that she was playing with fire. She knew full well that she was playing with *the* Fire.

"There's nothing you can do," he told her—honestly, so far as he knew. "There are only two ways to live in these Last Days: in hope or in terror. I don't have the choice, but you do. Be glad that you're blind, Dr. Drayling."

"I can't give up," she told him. "*We* can't give up. We have to *try,* and we have to force you to help us. You do understand that, don't you?"

"Of course I do," he retorted. "Why do you think I've lived my life the way I have? Why do you think I'm dying my death the way I am? *What other choices have I ever had?*"

When two in the morning rolled around again, Caxton switched off the TV and meekly lay down on his bunk, wondering whether sleep itself might be a *defense mechanism.* Maybe it was a device thrown up by natural selection to put the dreams in psychic prison, to hold them back from breaking through into waking life and conquering consciousness itself. Maybe the unconscious, regardless of whether Freud or Jung had made the better map of it, was just one of many barbed-wire barriers erected to keep the awful truth at bay. Maybe he had told Susan Drayling the simple truth when he said that it was only in the last hundred years that the barriers had *really* begun to crumble. Maybe the formulation of the Fermi paradox had been the trigger.

If we are not alone, where the fuck are they?

In Heaven, Enrico. All in Heaven, in blissful union with Creation—and we can't keep them out any longer. No matter how hard we try, the knowledge is forcing itself upon us: the knowledge that destroys the distinction between past and future; the knowledge that nothing is changeable, that everything merely *is.*

He wasn't yet asleep, but he could feel himself trembling. He was sweating again too, but sweating with pure terror rather than any mere physical malaise. There was nothing he could do to deaden himself against it.

If he had been given a pill, he would have taken it—or two, or five, or however many he had been given . . . but he had none, and he knew that he had always been fated to come to this moment having none: that nothing he could have done, even in the full glare of consciousness, could have altered this eventuality, even though it had been the result of a long series of considered and calculatedly perverse *choices.*

Susan Drayling had rewarded his cooperation by holding back the lucidity-stimulant for one more day, but he knew full well that he no longer needed that kind of help. He was already wide open, and had been since the day he took flight from Bolton.

Even though he was not yet asleep, his stream of consciousness was becoming a deranged shower of images, and he couldn't keep the train of his thoughts together. Terror was in him, as it always had been, and he had no way to fight it—no way at all.

Waking, he dreamed, and he *saw,* and he *was* what he saw, and he smiled as he saw that he was right and right and right again, and always had been. He was right because there was nothing he or anyone else could be but *right,* because there was no other way to turn and no way at all to sin. Everybody, in the end, had to go to Heaven.

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Everybody, in a sense—perhaps the only sense that mattered—always *had been* in Heaven. What would be was as absolute and eternal as what had been. The human race was fixed like any other race, and every runner was an also-ran, so there wasn't a winning bet on the book. He realized, too, the final cost of living on the margin—of stretching his freedom the only way freedom could be stretched, of staying one step ahead of the doppelgänger dogging his every footfall, of staying hidden and being discreet, of being moderate and growing old, of beating the odds and knowing all the while that the odds could never be beaten, of staving off the inevitable until the inevitable became the inevitable because it had always *been* the inevitable.

He gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut against the pain and the light, the hurt and the enlightenment. Doctor Susan Drayling had no idea at all how little time she had, how little time *everybody* had.

It wasn't necessary to set a date for the End of the World, or the time of night when the darkness was deepest, because the dawn would never come.

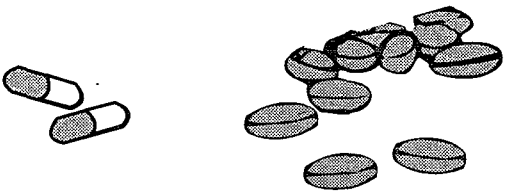
And for the first time in his life, Simple Simon Caxton saw the celestial dreamers clearly, in all their terrifying beauty, and all their horrid harmony, and all their stupid, futile, insane Allness. He knew that it wouldn't have mattered a damn if he'd swallowed a pill, or two, or five, because time was and time is and time will be, and all the time in the world is *never*.

No way in the world was Dad's stroke just a stupid coincidence, he thought, while thought was still possible and still, somehow, seemed desirable. The celestial dreamers themselves burst the vessel in his bloody brain and flooded his bloody brain with bloody blood, and serve the bloody bastard right. When had it ever been any different for Oracles—for those who saw that they could see, and proved to others that they saw what they could see, even though the others *couldn't* see, and couldn't understand, and couldn't control their stupid, futile hunger to *know* because they couldn't escape the stupid, futile illusion that if only they *knew,* there would be something they could *do*.

It was, after all, perfectly bloody obvious to anyone with half a bloody brain that if anything could be changed, then it couldn't be *seen* and couldn't be *known* and couldn't even bloody *be*.

But he wondered, when he knew—with a curious sense of relief—that he was well and truly lost, whether it really was THE END for *everyone,* or whether what he had taken for THE END might not be the triumph of the celestial dreamers at all, but simply his *own* personal end: which could not be contained, but could not, in the end, be or become anything but his own personal nothingness.

He hoped, honestly and sincerely, that it was only his own death that had brought itself about by the terror of foreknowledge. He wished no ill to anybody else. As a devout Hartmannist, he wanted both humanity and reality to endure forever—and perhaps even, in time, to get to know one another a little better. O



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A PICTURE POSTCARD OF THE CERNE ABBAS GIANT

The giant faces the sky, his left hand open in welcome, his right clenched firmly to the haft of a knotted club. His rampant and prodigious penis must also bear meaning.

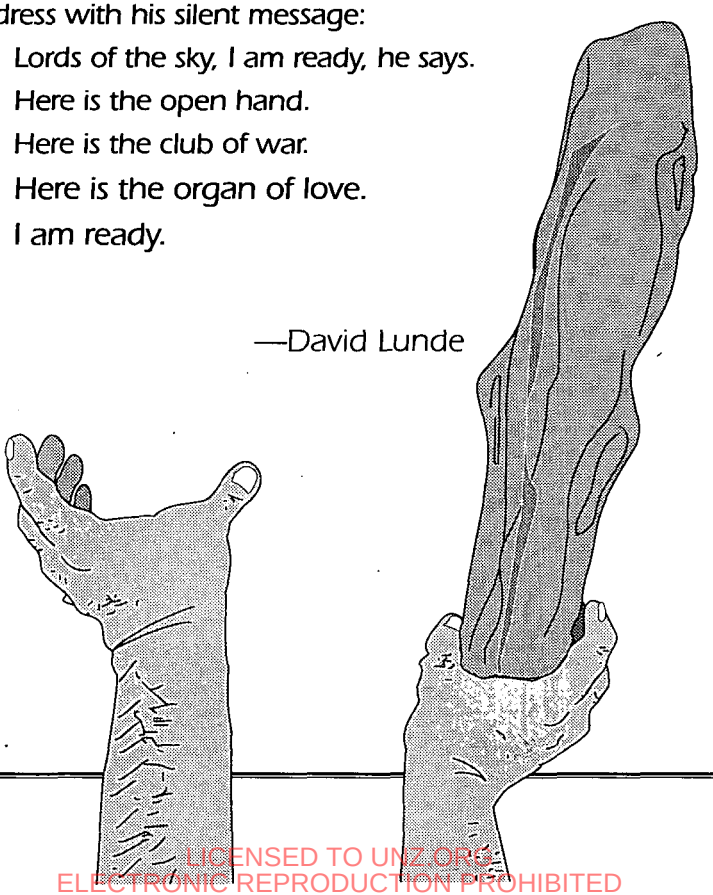
The giant reclines on his back on a Dorset cliff. From the air his outline carved into the white limestone is readily visible against the green of spring grass.

From the ground one's eye cannot resolve his image.

One wonders what eyes the giant's creators sought to address with his silent message:

Lords of the sky, I am ready, he says.
Here is the open hand.
Here is the club of war.
Here is the organ of love.
I am ready.

—David Lunde



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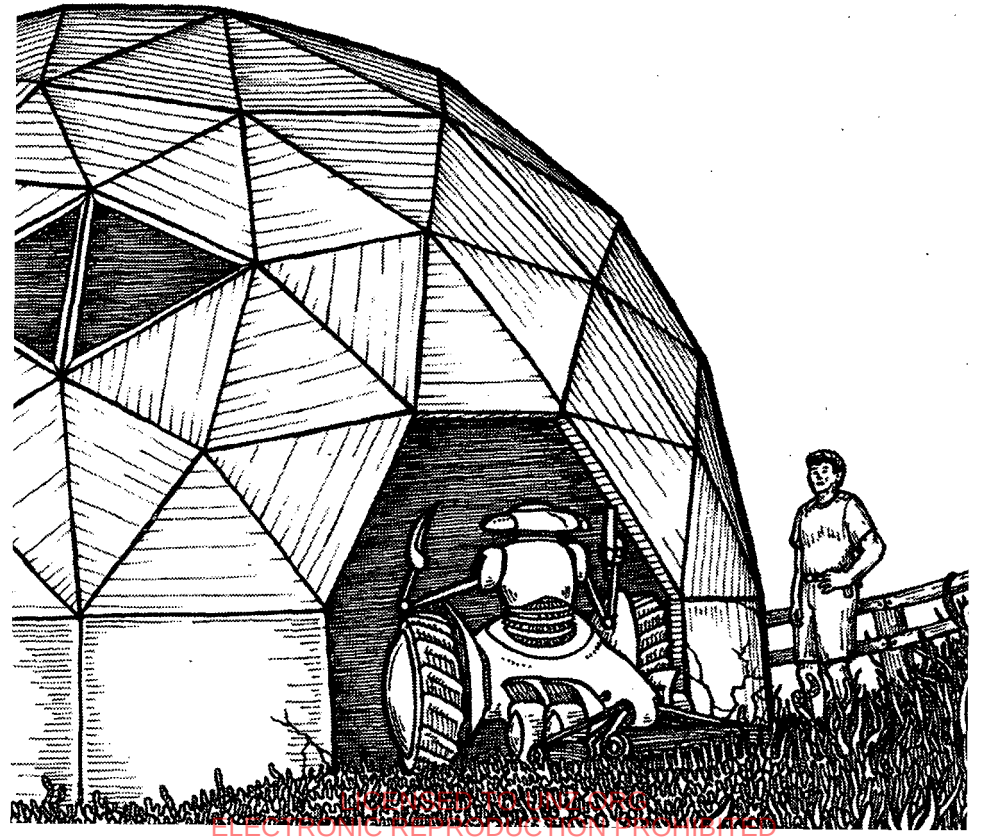
Don D'Ammassa

WORMDANCE

Don D'Ammassa is the author of over a hundred short stories for *Analog, Absolute Magnitude*, Whitley Strieber's *Aliens*, and other magazines and anthologies. He is the regular book reviewer for *Science Fiction Chronicle*, and he is also the author of one novel, *Blood Beast* (Pinnacle), and numerous nonfiction articles. Mr. D'Ammassa, who lives in East Providence, Rhode Island, is a network administrator for a chemical company. "Wormdance" is his first story for *Asimov's*.

Illustration by Wolf Read



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It was on Cille's fifteenth birthday that the wormswell came to our farm. At least, that's the day when we first noticed it. Things move so slowly for wormswell that it's difficult to tie specific events in their lives to such a fleeting moment as a day, even the twenty-six standard hour day of Aragon. It was my brother Jesper who brought us the news, running recklessly up from the north pasture, windmilling his arms and shouting whenever he could spare the breath. Dad spotted him first, rose up from where he was fitting a new board into the front steps where a rotten one had snapped the day before. His face was expressionless, but I could see his hands tightening into fists where they hung by his sides.

"What is it now?" Mom pushed open the screen door and stepped out onto the porch, raising one hand to shade her eyes from the bright double sunlight. It was near high high noon, and the sky was almost completely cloudless. If either of Aragon's double stars had been as warm as Sol, we'd have risked a bad sunburn just standing outside unprotected.

"We'll know presently," my father answered calmly. "If he doesn't break his fool neck getting here." He glanced in my direction. "Did he say where he was going this morning, Ennis?"

I shrugged, and turned back to the stack of cornfruits I had been husking. Jesper and I had had a fight the night before, an ongoing battle because I was tired of having to pick up part of his share of the chores. I'd appealed to Dad, and he'd told me that the two of us were old enough to work it out ourselves, and that neither of us would be happy if he had to intervene—but the fact was that Jesper just wouldn't stick to a job until it was finished. Even if it was something he enjoyed doing, he'd get bored and wander off sooner or later, and if it was something he actually hated—as was the case with most of our duties on the farm—it was more often sooner than later. Don't get me wrong; I loved my younger brother intensely, but love doesn't get the barns clean, or the crab hens back into their nests.

Jesper slowed considerably toward the end, climbing the slope atop which we'd built the house. We'd tried to keep the wiregrass cut to ankle-deep here, what Mom called our "lawn," but two of the maintenance bots had been waiting for spare parts for three months, and the four that were left were barely able to keep up with the tilling and harvesting schedules, so it had grown without interference for some time now. We could see Jesper's head and shoulders bobbing above the silken tops as he advanced. We could probably have heard him if he'd kept shouting from this close, but Jesper was saving all of his breath for the effort needed to push through the chest-high grass.

Cille came outside, blinking rapidly in the glare. Her bare arms were improbably slim for a Baxter. We're a big-boned, heavily fleshed family, always have been. And working the farm ensures that it's muscle and not fat. At eighteen, I was already as big as Dad, and Jesper, two years behind, was taller than both of us, though we each had a few pounds on him yet. Mom was no slouch either; she worked in the fields when her other responsibilities were out of the way, and she was solid enough to provide a painful whack when the two of us boys deserved it.

But Cille was different. Not fragile by any means, although she looked it compared to the rest of us. Wire-hard though, tough enough to have spent twenty straight hours helping us shore up the retaining walls when our small dam let go and the east fields were in danger of flooding. She had another strength as well, one unique in our family. The Baxters abide by themselves, as a family and as individuals. Too much so, I suspect. When

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things go bad, when we're discouraged or tired or worried, we shrink into our separate selves to work things out. Cille—well, she didn't seem to *have* moods. She got tired like the rest of us, but she never let it bother the part of herself that was born wondering about the world around her.

"What's going on?" She followed our eyes, lifting a hand to shade her eyes. Jesper broke out into the open a minute later.

"North field. Down by the new barn." His voice was hoarse from shouting and his breathing was ragged. "Coming up right where we plowed!"

Dad took a step forward. "What's coming up, son? Not bitter grass again, is it?"

Jesper stopped a few meters from us, half crouched over with his hands on his thighs, fighting for breath. "Wormswell," he said at last. "Looks like a big one!"

The five of us went off to look.

We'd seen wormswell before, of course. There'd even been a couple of them on our property, though they were both pretty small. Wormswell are Aragon's largest form of animal life, but no one had any real idea how numerous they might be. They lived underground, most of the time, surfacing once every several years to soak up some sunlight and pollinate. Yes, I said pollinate. I'll explain that later.

This one wasn't visible yet, though we could see evidence of its presence from the opposite end of the freshly tilled field. Several saplings were bent back at odd angles where the ground had literally started to rise beneath them. Wormswell moved almost imperceptibly through the soil most of the time, absorbing the soil at one end, removing the nutrients to fuel their incredibly slow metabolisms, excreting whatever was left in their wake. No one knew how deep they went, although it was certainly at least several hundred feet. A few had been unearthed when the spaceport at Aladda was being built—great featureless sluglike creatures—but their flesh wasn't fit to eat, they posed no apparent danger to anyone, and they'd been accepted and almost forgotten.

Almost, but not quite. Part of their life cycle was a periodic rise to the surface, the only time when their metabolism actually accelerated to the merely ponderous. They broke out into the open, and, when the sunlight touched their armored hides, they went through a transformation that had attracted scientists from all over this region of space.

Dad considered the future with a more-jaundiced eye. "It's likely going to rip up a third of the field before it's done."

I confess that I was pretty unhappy as well. We'd spent a lot of sweat culling all of the buried rocks out of this field, then ploughing what was left in anticipation of seeding. The bluebug infestation had wiped out a third of our pseudowheat crop that year, and we were hoping to recoup some of the losses by increasing the acreage we had under cultivation. The cresting wormswell was near the edge of the field, about forty meters from the new barn we'd had built during the spring. Assuming this individual was about average in size, he'd tear up a line about twenty meters in all four directions when he finally broke free. And then he'd sit there for about thirty days before slowly sinking back. By then we'd have missed an entire crop cycle, even if we reploughed and seeded right away.

"Might be a small one," I suggested hopefully.

"Might be a *big* one," contradicted Jesper. "Came up awfully fast."

Dad was scratching his head, measuring things with his eyes. "Your

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brother's right, Ennis. I was up this way day before yesterday. Not even a swell then."

I didn't understand, and said so.

"When they surface, they come straight *up*, faster'n they do otherwise but still damned slow. I think we're going to have to write off this field for the season."

It was even worse than that, but we didn't find out the extent of the disaster until later.

It began to broach four days later. Dad was driving us harder than ever, apparently resigned to the loss of the north field for the season, trying to find ways to squeeze as much as possible out of what remained to us. After two days widening the arable part of the west field, Jesper and I had pretty much forgotten about the wormswell. Cille hadn't though. She'd been spending half the day working alongside us, hacking at the wiregrass and sawbrush with a wide-bladed knife, then helping us carry it to what we'd decided would be the new border of the field. The rest of the time she spent at the house. She was a pretty handy carpenter, though sometimes a little too fussy about unimportant details.

But somehow she found time to wander down to the north field and check on our unwelcome guest. .

"It broke through today," she announced at dinner that night.

I can't speak for the others, but I was so tired and sore that I hadn't the vaguest idea what she was talking about, and frankly didn't much care just then either.

"The wormswell," she explained unbidden. "It's above the ground, part of it anyway. It hasn't started dancing yet." There was a hint of disappointment.

"Has to get its whole snout out first," Dad answered. "Another day or so, probably." He didn't sound enthused, although the wormdance was a beautiful sight. Jesper and I'd sneaked over more than once to watch the one that'd broken through in our woodlot two years earlier. But I realized suddenly that Cille had never been able to go with us. The first time we'd had one on the property, she'd been away in Aladda Port for a term at school; the other time, she'd been restricted to the house because of a leg broken in a fall from one of our lofts.

Dad must have remembered the same thing just then, because he offered her one of his rare smiles. "You'll get to see it this time, Cille. I promise."

Two days later, there was still no dance, and the same two days after that. By then we had a bigger problem, no pun intended.

"We're gonna lose the whole field, aren't we?" Jesper sounded resigned, as well he should be. The crest of the swell was well over our heads by now, and the ground sloped away steeply for twenty meters in every direction. Not only saplings had succumbed; full-sized trees had fallen along the wooded segment of the wormswell's perimeter.

"More than that." Dad's voice was even more doleful than usual. He glanced toward the barn, the new barn, then back to the wormswell.

"It can't be *that* big!" I protested hotly.

"The forward collar isn't visible yet." He pointed to the most recently exposed part of the emerging creature. It was a pitted expanse of dark grey, leathery hide. "Three rings need to emerge before it'll start dancing. It'll rise

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some more after that, not getting any taller but spreading out. That's when it'll take the barn, if it's as big as I think."

Mom didn't say anything, but she touched him on the arm. It didn't need saying. We'd weathered three marginal years in a row, borrowed heavily for the new barn to process what was supposed to be the crop from this field. One season's loss would hurt, but we'd get by. If the *barn* went . . . well, I wasn't sure just what might happen then. We could even lose the farm.

"There must be something we can do!" I blurted.

"Are you kidding? Look at the *size* of this thing!" Jesper walked closer and spread his arms wide.

"Maybe we could move the barn," I suggested. "Hire a choplifter. Take off the roof. Move all the heavy equipment out of the way, then collapse the walls until it goes back down."

"Every choplifter on the planet's working on the spaceport expansion. Even if one was free, we couldn't afford to hire it." He smiled insincerely. "We might get lucky. Sometimes they don't spread that much. We'll have to keep an eye on things."

The first ring emerged sometime during that night, and three days later, the worm began its dance. The barn was intact, for the moment. Apparently our visitor was a lot more cylindrical than average, although the portion of its body that lay exposed to view was better than fifty meters in diameter, and the ground for another thirty meters around its circumference displayed some degree of stress. The near wall of the barn was buckled, but the metal hadn't actually split yet, and there were cracks in the foundation. We'd moved out some of the smaller equipment, but that tended to be the less expensive items. We still faced a crippling loss if the wormswell got much bigger than it already was.

We were all there except Mom, adding makeshift braces and tying down the big process equipment, when the dance started.

If you haven't seen a wormdance from close up, you can't know how beautiful it is. Even the holos don't do it justice. The rough hide had been showing more and more cracks every day, and now there was an eruption of filmy tentacles bursting out everywhere. They were pale that first day, translucent blues and pinks and yellows, and they moved with slow, sinewy grace, rising from within the wormswell's body, the longest a full six meters tall, others, more numerous, just brushing our ankles. From the central shaft, fronds of wormflesh opened like unfurling leaves on short stalks, predominantly spatulate but interspersed with other forms, sails of lace, spiky shafts, twisting corkscrews. Everything was in constant movement, movement that would become more rapid as the sunlight poured energy into these organic batteries. That first day, it was silent as well, but I knew from the last time that this would not last. As the diaphanous forest of flesh grew taller and richer, its colors deepening, the undulating forms would begin to brush against one another, until eventually there would be the endless susurration known as wormsong.

We each walked our separate path within the wormdance. Enough of the creature had been exposed by now that the four of us could stand each concealed from the rest. And that's what three of us did, watching with dread and appreciation all mixed together. But Cille felt no dread. She was caught up in the beauty of it like no one I've ever seen, before or since. She ran from one spot to another, pausing to peer closely at a particularly graceful frond,

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or an interesting splash of color, laughing with delight and calling to us to come see, but then dashing onward to the next wonder before we could respond.

Near the center, there was what amounted to a small ravine cut into the creature's flesh, big enough that I could have pitched a tent inside, set up camp, and remained hidden from anyone passing more than a couple of meters away. It must have encountered a ledge of rock as it made its way through the subsoil. When Dr. Estallah came out to see the wormswell a couple of days later, he explained it to me.

"They move and think so slowly, they don't react the way ordinary animals would. Likely this one kept trying to grow through a spur of rock until its body just sort of flowed along the sides, leaving this big scar even after it passed on into softer earth."

I sat there on the edge of that ravine, admiring the show, and struck by how even the agent of terrible destruction could be a beautiful sight.

Cille touched my shoulder. "Isn't it wonderful?"

For some reason, her joy aggravated me just at that moment. "I don't see how you can say that. We're probably going to lose the farm because of this thing."

"Oh, things will work out. I just know it. Nothing this beautiful could hurt us!"

But she was wrong.

We finished bracing the barn, but before we could go back, Dad made us inspect the dike. Lake Pudawallah sat solemnly behind it, the source of our extensive irrigation system. The rainy season this year had been much more intense than usual, and the water lapped against the top layer of the dike system. Runoff from the mountains was still rushing in from the east, but we'd built the dike with a considerable safety margin.

We'd pretty much finished our inspection when a loud crack startled us. Dad glanced back at the wormswell. "That was quick. They don't usually start till the second day."

Our wormswell was pollinating. They're animals, like I said, but they have a unique method of reproducing. Underground, they were pretty much self-sufficient, but when the time came to procreate, they surfaced and sucked up the sunlight. In and among the dancing structures were straight pillars that looked like giant asparagus. When enough energy accumulated in one of these, drawn from the energy collectors around it, the wormswell expelled what I guess you'd call a sperm, although they're hermaphrodites. The sperm was fired up into the upper atmosphere, where it remained viable for up to thirty local days. If it encountered another, suitable partner before falling to the ground, the united pair would then tunnel into the soil, and, presto, the start of a new wormswell.

As orgasms went, this was pretty spectacular.

We settled into a grim routine after that. Everything that was portable enough to be moved was out of the barn, stored temporarily in a prefab shack Jesper and I set up at the opposite end of the field. The wormswell's exposed surface grew another couple of meters, but the bracing on the barn held, and I began to feel more optimistic. Then Dad let us go along when he took Dr. Estallah out to look things over.

Estallah's an exobiologist who supports himself teaching school at Aladda

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Port. He's pretty much the only real expert on Aragon's indigenous life, although he claims he's barely scratched the surface. He heard about our visitor somewhere, and called up, inviting himself out. Dad doesn't take much to having outsiders on the property, but I guess he figured he'd pick the man's brains a bit.

"Biggest I've ever seen," Estallah told us. "Though there was one down near Tetrada that had a diameter near 150 meters." Ours was 75 meters, but still growing.

"How big do you figure this one's likely to be?" Dad's eyes kept flicking back and forth to the wormdance, which was so fast now it was hard to follow individual shapes, and the barn.

Estallah was silent, walked back and forth, pacing things off. His eyebrows rose at one point. I didn't think this was a good sign. Then he took some kind of electronic device out of his backpack and placed it on a bit of mostly level ground. He watched the illuminated readings for a few seconds, then climbed up into the wormdance, disappearing almost immediately.

"What's he doing?" The tiny pops of the wormswell's ejaculations came every two or three minutes now.

"Just be patient, Ennis. The man knows what he's doing." I could feel the tension in Dad's voice, and see it in the way his shoulders never eased up while we stood there. When Estallah reappeared, he wasn't alone.

"Cille! What the hell are you doing up here?"

Oblivious to Dad's clear annoyance, Cille gestured back to the wormdance. "It just keeps getting faster and more beautiful, doesn't it? I saw some new shapes today, kind of like giant ferns, except that they coil up into tubes every once in a while. And there's another kind that sprays these silky strands up into the air, and they float down ever so slowly."

"Isn't your mother harvesting the crab hens today?"

Cille's smile went down a notch. "Yeah, but she isn't going to start until after lunch."

"Then that gives you time to sweep out the moltings beforehand, doesn't it?"

Cille gave him an exaggerated look of reproach, then sketched a salute, said goodbye to Dr. Estallah, and ran back toward the house. Dad forgot her almost instantly.

"Care to guess how big it's going to get?"

Estallah looked solemn, glanced around before answering. I noticed his eyes lingered on the barn. "Can't be precise. Sometimes they don't surface completely."

"Close is good enough." I think Dad had already figured out the answer, or at least the consequences.

"Hundred meters minimum, more likely half again that."

I opened my mouth to say something, but no words came. A hundred meters would put the wormdance inside the barn, half again as much would put the barn inside the wormdance.

"Any way of keeping it down there? Maybe cover the exposed part so it can't find the sun?"

Estallah shook his head. "That'd just make it spread further, looking for the light."

"How about poison?" I was shocked by this. I'd never heard of anyone killing a wormswell before, not even by accident.

But Estallah was shaking his head again. "Metabolism's too slow. You could give it a fatal dose all right, and a month or so from now, it'd start dy-

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ing, and eventually you'd have one gigantic corpse lying in, and under, your field."

"There's got to be something we can do."

"Move the barn," Estallah said quietly. "And be glad it didn't come up closer to your dike."

I glanced toward the lake, three hundred meters away, and realized what would have happened if the wormswell had chosen to surface there. Maybe, all things considered, we hadn't been as unlucky as we might have been. But it still might be sufficient to cost us the farm.

Dad invited Dr. Estallah to stay for dinner, which surprised me. I'd expected Mom to extend the offer, but Dad has never been particularly graceful in social situations. Lack of practice, I guess. He had an ulterior motive, of course. He wanted to pump the man for information, convinced that somehow there was a way to divert the wormswell. I sensed the way his mind was working, but I wasn't hopeful. The creature was just so immense, the idea of affecting its plans in any way seemed to me just so much wishful thinking.

"What would happen if we took the autoscythes in and just cut down all of the wormdance?"

Cille choked on her food. "Dad! You wouldn't!"

"Just theoretically," he said soothingly, but without fooling anyone.

Estallah chewed for a while before answering. "Most likely, it would spread faster, bring more of itself to the surface. The shorn parts would grow back quickly in any case. You'd see fresh growth in four or five days. Their regenerative powers are amazing."

"Is there any way to prevent the regrowth?"

"I suppose you could cauterize the area. Build up enough scar tissue, and the fresh growth wouldn't be able to break through."

"Wouldn't it just spread out around the scar tissue?" I asked.

Estallah was silent for another bite or two. "Maybe. Maybe not. We just don't know enough about them. They will eventually withdraw if they encounter an obstruction they can't move. It's possible that damage to the core of the exposed area would have the same effect, but I wouldn't count on it."

Dad didn't say much more that evening, but I could see in his eyes that he'd made a decision.

Cille and Dad had an argument the following morning. Such a simple thing to say, such a complex and shocking event. I'd never seen her so upset before; no one had.

"You can't do it! You just *can't!* It doesn't know it's hurting anything. This is *its* world, and it's just acting according to its nature!"

"Cille, if we lose the barn, we'll probably lose the farm. I know it seems cruel, but we have to drive it back underground."

"By burning it? How can you even think about doing something so horrible?"

Dad sighed. "Dr. Estallah said it probably wouldn't even feel pain, just a sense that something was wrong. I'm sorry, Cille, I really am. If there were any other way. . . ." His voice trailed off. "I've made my decision."

And even Cille heard the determination in his voice, and subsided. We knew she wasn't happy, but she'd accepted the decision.

We spent the whole day ferrying canisters of synthfuel down to the north field.

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* * *

We all went to bed early that night, exhausted from the effort, knowing that eventually we'd have to work long hours catching up on the work that we should have been doing that day. It must've taken Dad three or four tries to wake me up when he came into our room early the following morning. Too early.

I glanced at the window. There wasn't even a hint of the dawn. "What's wrong?"

"Quiet!" Dad's whisper was intense. "You and your brother, get up and dressed. Don't make any noise."

"Wha's going on?" Judging by Jesper's slurred words, he was even less alert than I was.

"We're going up to burn the wormswell. I want to get it done before your sister wakes up. She'll insist on coming up to watch us do it, and I don't want her seeing this. It'll be better that way."

We ate cold biscuits while we walked, using a flasher to light the way. When we reached the wormswell, we could see that some of our bracing had given way; the buckled wall of the barn was beginning to split. There was no longer any question; if this didn't work, we were going to lose the whole thing.

We strapped spraypacks onto our backs and attached them to the first three canisters.

"Be careful not to get caught in each other's spray," cautioned Dad as we began walking the perimeter, directing the streams of fuel back and forth, coating everything we could reach with a thin film of flammable mist. The sun was just starting to come up when we finished.

"Get back behind the barn," Dad ordered as he primed the flare. Jesper and I retreated, but we watched as he stood there, hesitating, and I knew that even he was troubled by the destruction of such beauty, no matter how necessary it was. Then he tossed the flare and ran toward us, and the night turned to day behind him.

The shockwave knocked us all from our feet and blew the buckled section off the barn. We lay with our hands over our heads, but the immediate fury died away within seconds, and in less than a minute, we stood, blinking, and emerged from behind our shelter.

The wormdance was, of course, completely gone, replaced by clouds of smoke and ash. But there was still something moving out there in the forest of death, something that moved unsteadily, weaving blindly. It reached the perimeter of the blasted area and then collapsed.

Cille had sneaked out of the house to spend one last night among the dancing structures of the wormswell. She died less than an hour later.

That was the worst of it, but it wasn't the last. Dad's gamble worked. The shock of cauterization discouraged the wormswell from rising any further, or perhaps it had discharged enough of its sperm shells for this cycle of its life. For whatever reason, it began to subside the following day.

Two days after that, during a particularly violent storm, lightning struck our dike and blew out the section adjoining the north field. It was completely flooded, and we lost virtually everything in the new barn except the shell itself.

But when you've already lost everything, a little more makes no difference at all. O

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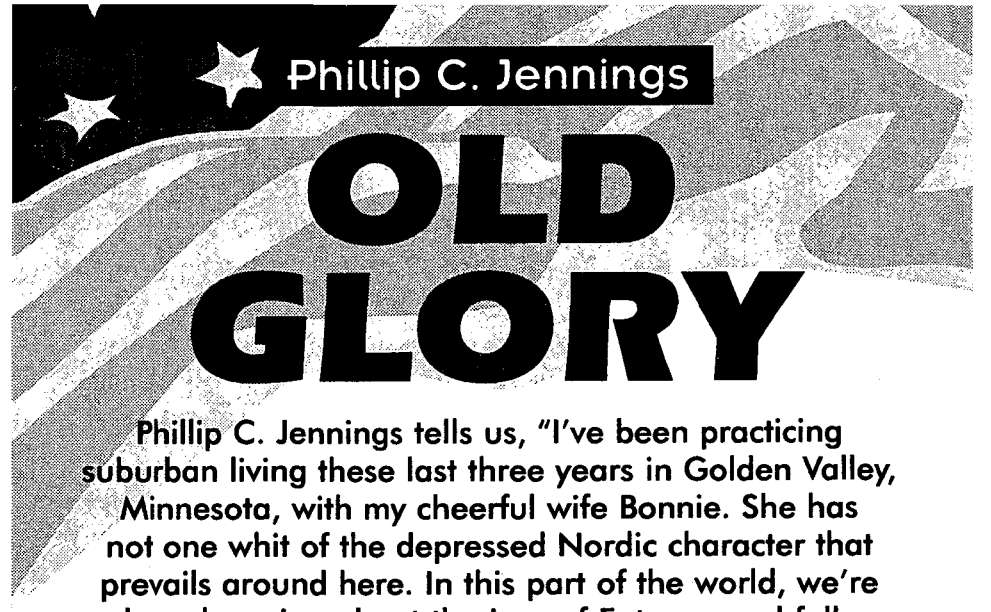

Phillip C. Jennings tells us, "I've been practicing suburban living these last three years in Golden Valley, Minnesota, with my cheerful wife Bonnie. She has not one whit of the depressed Nordic character that prevails around here. In this part of the world, we're born knowing about the Law of Entropy, and fully expect things to fall apart, hence this story."

All last summer the courthouse flag flew at half-mast, as great Americans died in succession. People got used to seeing it that way. It wouldn't have been right to raise it high, even after we lost track of the proclamations. We all had families and friends to mourn.

Our county was rural and we didn't have lots of people to start with. I was the registrar of deeds, and county clerk, and whatever else I needed to be. When Sheriff Feist needed help booking some weird Aryan Nazi protester, I inked the guy for fingerprints. Our tax base was property, so when people died and their heirs took over, we had to add to our records, but it wasn't urgent. Nobody raised a fuss until things started to fall to pieces. Not until the heirs *didn't* take over, which meant they were dead themselves, or maybe they were hiding, living like hermits to avoid exposure to Tarik's Disease.

The Disease—you got it and had a three days' fever. During that time you were contagious, and then you dropped into a coma. Six hours later you were dead. Or else you were in the lucky 10 percent who lived, but since it went to the brain, that wasn't necessarily good. The best choice was to avoid exposure in the first place, but that meant not buying groceries, skipping services, and abandoning your job. Most people, after two weeks or so, crept back to a few cautious connections.

Judge Munkhaus died the last week of July, and Sheriff Feist and I went through the list of lawyers in the yellow pages. Of course, in a place this small we already knew Fergus was dead, and we wouldn't have had Martinson on a dare. Neither Olson nor Dumbrowski answered the phone to take Munkhaus's job, so we ended up calling Jamestown, which wasn't even our own county.

Judge Vanderhan was new to his robes. His advice was to lock the courthouse and transfer the records, because he figured the Disease was just go-

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ing to keep on. "We'll see draconian measures," he said. "Mark my words, Rachel. This whole state might dissolve."

"The records are a mess," I said. "We don't know who owns what. There's so many wills that haven't been probated, and people dying intestate."

"There's a place called Cyberscan," Vanderhan said. "I'll get the number. You go there and get a scanner and a computer and this other gizmo, and put those records on compact disk. I'm writing out the order now, so it'll be sort of legal. You fetch the hardware and copy all that paper, and then lock up."

After the call Sheriff Feist and I looked at each other. "He's got no authority to tell us what to do," Feist said. "Still, it stands to reason. Winters here are hell. We should lock up and drive south. Things are collapsing."

Feist had a huge key-ring. He unlocked the pump at Bud's Service 76 and gassed his car for the trip. That afternoon we drove back with all this gear, that I had to plug in and get running. I like the language of computers; those warm boots and shadow rams, but the business of "burning a worm"was new to me.

It kept me busy for the next weeks. I was grateful for that, because Feist took ill at his brother's funeral and when he died I had nobody at all. Growing up as the sole Jewish girl in a county where it was a scandal when a Lutheran married a Catholic, I had no local prospects, and—well, I might have been cute at the right age, but I'd had bad acne that left me with scars, so what were my chances? By my mid-thirties, none at all. By my fifties, forget it. When the new Poik treatments came in and millions of us started getting young again, the scars stayed with me, although they're getting better. Just my luck! Pushing retirement-age with a body as good as it's ever been, and it's the women who can have babies that get the attention.

Well, now I'm talking like there's a future, but this story is about last year, and some things that affected a lot of lonely people in our lonely county, people like me and people in quarantine, and people with their families subtracted away, who sometimes stopped burying the bodies. When a house smelled bad, they just kept their distance. Except we had a few disease-survivors who were immune and could go in and strip away everything valuable. When you got Tarik's Disease and lived, if you had enough brain function afterward, that's how you made do. I almost said, that's how you paid the bills, but the whole business of electricity and phones and mortgage payments got messed up with the collapse. Vital Service proclamations kept the power plants running, so who bothered with bills anymore?

Every day I heard chain saws. The sound carried for miles as farmers cut wood for winter fuel, working those solitary early morning hours while I shook out the flag and raised it half-high. It was my job now—For the month of August I was local government for people who wanted to pay taxes or get a license. I sorted the courthouse mail and left most of it unopened. I could usually tell by the weight if there were keys inside. I became keeper of the keys for Bud's Service 76, but after facing the barrel of Martinson's gun one day, I just left the pumps unlocked. On Labor Day a carload of Canadians came by, with Manitoba plates. They helped themselves, but when they went into the grocery store and started grabbing, there was a gunfight.

Afterward a local teenager with the unfortunate name of Elmer took the car, with a tank of gas and some other plunder. The way I understand it,

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the girl who stole it from him to make her flight south was shot as a thieving Canadian near Grand Island, Nebraska. We lived for the radio, hearing stories like that, and stories about explosions when people died without shutting things off. We heard about people killing their pets, or letting them go free, sad choices either way. The violence was distressing, and since I doubt there was a rabbi within two hundred miles, I had my option who to talk to about it—call one number and get Father Krakowski, or the other and talk to Reverend Ylvisaker.

They were both convinced we were better off not going south, what with people down there turning vicious, especially those in quarantine too long, and not logical anymore. We had some cases even here where people fired shots to keep others away. "This is what I think, Rachel," Father Krakowski said. "We should do it differently. We're all afraid of the winter, and October is just around the corner. What happens when the power lines fail, and a lot of people's furnaces use electricity for ignition? I've been talking to Reverend Ylvisaker. He agrees with me. We should have a picnic. We should have the biggest, last, best picnic this county has ever seen, and give it all to the survivors."

Down at the post office, Denise thought it was a terrific idea. When I printed the invitations, she gassed that cute little mail truck and ran them around, taking all three routes. Nobody ever shot at Denise, because she was the US Post and a safe connection to the world, with the authority of centuries of government, and anyway Denise was round and cheerful and never got closer than the mailbox, which was usually at the turn of the driveway a good fifty yards from the house. Even Mr. Martinson held fire.

She came back from her routes late in the afternoon, straight to the courthouse. I opened the door and she heaved inside and gave me a list. "These are the people whose boxes are full. Nobody's emptied them for days and weeks. I figured you might check against your information."

"How about dogs?"

"There must be bad dogs, because I passed a herd of cows by Larson's Dam, and they did this horns-out trick when I drove by. We should be shooting dogs when we see them."

"I don't know if I'm ready to do that," I said.

"We're living in the past," Denise said. "It'll be different soon. We're like Romans in togas who've outlived the empire, but we don't know how to dress for the new age."

"Warm, that's all. I'm going to dress warm," I said. "Nothing else matters."

"Life without chocolate," Denise spoke mournfully. "That'll be the worst thing. I'm bringing a chocolate cake to the picnic. One last glorious chocolate cake."

North of town along the river, where it does some horseshoe curves, there's a county park with playground equipment, a couple tame deer, and facilities for family reunions. Sunday came and we drove up. Our cars converged in one last traffic jam, like at a fireworks show or a football game. Father Krakowski and Reverend Ylvisaker greeted everyone, shaking hands and pointing out tables. We had prayers and shared our food, and Krakowski stood to make a speech. "I'm going to talk bawdy," he said. "I thought I'd warn you, because I'm going to start with the human body and ask questions like—what's the breastiest part of the breast? We've all got

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stomachs—what gives our stomachs that special definition? Well, in the one case it's nipples and in the other it's your belly button, and these aren't special because they're so big, but exactly otherwise. Men get defined as men because of a little something—and you're laughing now, but really, it's not so big, no matter what you think, but important, yes. And it's like that today with the whole of humankind and human nature. Most people in most places are huddling with their guns and gloom and ready to kill for survival, but they don't define our species and they don't shape our future. It's us today in this little event, we're the ones making room for hope, with this feast that's like a sacrament where everyone's invited, the sick and the well, and the ones who have already survived. And now let's sit and listen. Let's listen to each other, because this is the best and important part."

There was a pause, and then one old farmer got up—old, yes, but years younger than before Poik came along. "I've slaughtered a couple cows, and butchered the meat. It's in my freezer and the Smeds' freezer across the road. I've put both freezers outdoors, plugged into outdoors sockets, so when it gets cold and the power goes out, the meat will stay frozen but the dogs won't be able to get at it."

A woman at his table stood. "You know where my farm is. There's a shelterbelt where the road goes in, and behind the shelterbelt I've got a field full of potatoes. They're good where they are and you can fork them up as long as the ground's not frozen, or in the spring when it thaws, but don't try it in January or you'll need dynamite, and after dynamite potatoes don't taste so good."

People laughed. Martinson got up, and blushed a little. "I've got dynamite." He sat, and actually smiled when the crowd laughed again.

A Pole from out west stood up, twisting his cap in his hands. "I've still got the plow my granddad used when he busted the sod on our homestead. He kept the blade sharp to the end of his days, not a spot of rust. Come spring, someone can hitch up horses or a couple oxen. I've got a yoke for oxen in my tool shed. I took the metal parts and made a new one with new lumber."

Chip ran the Cenex station over at the 281 intersection. He stood. "You all know me. I've hid a lot of cigarettes and booze in my basement. You know I don't smoke, but the way I figure, after this winter is over, a pack of cigarettes is going to be like money. It'll count after paper is worthless."

I stood. "I'm going to leave the courthouse unlocked. In the hall inside is a board with keys, all labeled, to places you might want to get into, so you don't have to break in. I've collected almost three hundred keys."

And so it went. That whole day people shared what they had and what they knew. Meanwhile if any of us were running a fever, we all got exposed. Best now. It was best done now, done and over before the snow flew, and the thermometer plunged, and this county at the center of the continent became part of the polar icecap for nigh four months.

We passed a bottle and all took a swig. I took it over to Reverend Ylvisaker. He patted his forehead with a hanky, and drank and looked at me. "Do you know what garter snakes do in the winter?"

"No."

"They huddle together in a great ball, dug into a place in the earth. It's a miracle to see, but a lot of people would say it's a nightmare, because they're afraid of snakes. They're even afraid of harmless garter snakes that are so good in the garden. Are you afraid of snakes?"

"No, I'm not."

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"I've got a place south of the parsonage where the fruit cellar goes down. That's where they're balling together. It's something to see."

"I'd like to see it," I said.

"It'll be their world in the spring. Nature and wild animals. These plains are too cold for us humans. If we're lucky and live through the winter, we'll have to go south. By then the violent people down there will be dead, or changed."

"I was in Texas one January," I said. "It was green, and wet in Austin, and not very cold at all. They've got a university. That would be a good place to go."

Reverend Ylvisaker and I ate some of Denise's chocolate cake, and when we left the picnic we went to the parsonage, the three of us and some other visitors who wanted to see the snakes. We could tell that Ylvisaker had the fever. He was in the contagious stage. We made him comfortable, and waited. Denise showed me her list. She'd written down everything from the picnic. Then she opened her purse and pulled out her husband's old barber clippers. "I'm going right now and cut my hair short, so I don't get lice. You should too. Your turn next."

I gave her a look. She took my hand and squeezed hard. "We've got to do things for the best and keep going. It's not hopeless. You know what they say with a lot of these survivors? They start getting their functions back. That kid Elmer—he's only been weeks on his feet and he can drive a car! It's like after a stroke; the brain re-wires itself."

While I cut my hair, Reverend Ylvisaker sat in his recliner and watched a tape from his video collection, but he was starting to glaze and not be attentive, even when Denise sat at his side to be encouraging. "I heard on the radio how the Disease is mutating. It's evolving to become less lethal, because no virus wants to kill its host. They say that the rate of survival is curving up way over 10 percent."

He patted her hand. "They say so many things on the radio. We hang on every word. True comfort comes from the Bible." We stayed with him, and when he dropped off we closed his eyes so they wouldn't get dry. By morning he was dead. We slid him down his cellar with the snakes, and then drove off, me to raise the courthouse flag one last time, and then join a party in progress over at Father Krakowski's house.

Krakowski's place was full of old stuffed sofas and hand-me-down chairs and mismatched rugs that aspired to be shag, a good place to house a crowd. Even so it wasn't a good party, with many people less than lively because of the fever. I don't know why I didn't go home, except who wants to die alone? None of us, it seemed. The fever hit me that night, and by morning I was as quiet as everyone else, grateful for a place to sit, and grateful too for a drink of water when that Elmer boy came around, taking care of all of us.

We watched movies on TV and nibbled leftover ham. Father Krakowski collapsed while making soup and had to be taken to bed, so I hauled up and finished the job, not wanting to watch the tape. It was Robin Williams being hyperactive and viewing his energy made me all the more exhausted.

After that day we had a body or two, that Elmer took care of. He had a couple buddies that never talked but were good for jobs like that. We put out more leftovers and then I sank into a chair. I don't remember much after that. The worst hit me next day, I suppose, and I didn't die, but God I was addled, and if people talked at me I didn't understand them. It was

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worse with the delirium. I was playing movies out of my own brain, just like on TV, movies that had my old mom in them, with her thick accent, and Sheriff Feist talking to her in his loud way around the corner, none of the voices exactly in sight, but I heard them, Pastor Ylvisaker too, and Denise and Father Krakowski, bootsteps on the floor and shadows shifting and a twirling glimpse of an old print skirt. Any voice I heard, I thought it meant they were dead, but nobody knew what I was hearing because I didn't react at all. Here I was with the friends and family of all my years, and I just let them be, distressed only when the music started to repeat like a broken record, which got so maddening finally that I had to get up, people helping me and steering me where I needed to go, like a big dumb animal.

My memories are jumbled across all October and into November, before and after snow. Walking to a new house for food. Building a fire in the fireplace. Getting drunk with some guy that I don't remember at all. We were in that kind of shape, herding around in a gang like wild dogs, and sharing beds at night, the more bodies, the warmer. We were the survivors, but each of us had an imaginary gang too. One time someone gave me a bath and washed my hair with medicinal shampoo, and I swear it was Denise, but she was fifty pounds lighter. I looked at her hard, wanting her to be real, and in the end she was. What happened was, there'd been two gangs in town, but now we were just one.

The body has its own wisdom for dealing with cold and hunger and wild dogs, pushing the brain to wake up—*Wake up! We've got problems to solve!* By December my delirium was going away, and it was easier to sort out who was real. I got so if someone sent me to do a chore, I could actually get it done, fetching a blanket or breaking up kindling-wood, or carrying candles to the bedroom. By now the electricity was gone. We had a big storm followed by a blowing cold spell that lasted into January. After that the dogs were gone too, no more of their music in the night.

It warmed up for a couple days, and we made forays, discovering woodpiles and cans of Spaghetti-O's and a frozen deer. By their footprints we had live deer, which made sense because our town was an oasis of bushes and shrubs and trees. Now it was a dog-free oasis.

Passing the courthouse, I saw the flag still there, frozen stiff at half-mast, and I took it down to carry with me, part of my day's plunder. We put it over a cracked window in the house we moved to, a new house with more beds, that didn't smell bad from plugged and abused toilets. Our haven had an emergency potbellied stove in the basement, and we dragged mattresses down there and feasted on venison; venison steaks and venison stew, and venison with Spaghetti-O's. We lasted for a week and then we had an accident with the candles and burnt the place down just in time for another storm and the worst was that I'd lost the flag. We scattered to other places, but I stayed with Elmer and Denise. We were all bothered by the idea that some of us might have been trapped in that basement.

February I started getting some brains back. Before that my vocabulary was *uh-uh* and *okay*. In February Elmer set a few goals and Denise and I joined in talking them over. One thing we wanted to do was find batteries so we could run a radio, or maybe get a car started for that same purpose. I trusted myself to go exploring house-to-house, bringing home plunder, and if I found any car-keys I'd try the car, although with very little hope. Getting a car started that's sat for three months in the dead of winter was next to impossible.

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We wanted to hear radio so we'd know what was happening down south and in the rest of the world. We found a serious short wave radio in the old folks' home, elaborate enough to be someone's hobby back in the days before Poik treatments. Running that thing—in the end it meant pumping gas into a jerry-can and carrying it to Anderson's Implements, where there was a generator that Elmer got going, and then powering the whole building so that we could plug it into the wall. This was the sort of multi-step operation we were capable of doing, now that our brains were coming back.

The bad thing was, we didn't hear anybody. There just weren't any broadcasts that we could find. Maybe our timing was unlucky, but we didn't think so. No, the truth was things had fallen to pieces *everywhere,* and not just here on the forsaken fringes of civilization.

"We'll wait until the snow clears," Elmer said. "Then we go south. We'll travel light. Any car we can get going isn't likely to get all the way. We'll have to shift to something else, or just plain hike, so it's best if we don't have a lot of stuff."

"Two cars," Denise said. "There were nine or ten of us survived that fire, and we've seen the other folks around."

"Whatever. You know, maybe it's just that this radio doesn't work. It's too fancy and it's gone through temperature changes. It's German. Germans don't know about minus thirty degrees Fahrenheit."

"It makes a lot of hissing noises," I said.

"I'd like one of them old radios with vacuum tubes. We'd let it warm slowly, and then it would work just fine."

We never found a radio like that. After a week's tinkering, we *did* get a car started, and gassed it up. Warm weather was unpredictable, but we were ready and it happened, a three-day melt that made some roads driveable, so we could get some of that old farmer's freezer-meat. The trip took all day because Elmer never gave up and abandoned that beloved car, and his great triumph was getting back into town. We had a feast of freezer-burned beef, and the smell brought our whole population together, staring and grim because how did it happen that we were only seven?

How did it happen any dogs survived, for that matter? That night we heard howling. Some animal had moved in, maybe just one, maybe following the river. Next day the seven of us went over to the Martinson place, and made a pile of his guns and tried to figure them out. We laughed that crazy way scared people do, shooting at targets, until we learned to trust ourselves. We found Martinson's dynamite, too, but we left that for later. That was Elmer's idea: *Later.*

"Yeah," Denise joked. "We'll drive south with a car full of dynamite and guns and cigarettes and booze, and everybody we meet will know for sure we're a bunch of peaceful survivors."

"Whoever we meet will be just like us," someone said.

"What are we like? Do we even know?" Denise asked. "There's no sheriff now, no priest. You know, I'm thinking of early this winter, when there was some blackout sex going on—*I* sure wasn't really conscious most of the time. And—and bodies all over, who knows how they all died? Who kept track? So already we could be talking about rapes and murders."

"Oh, come on!" I said. "The Disease scrambled our brains. Nobody was responsible."

"From here on, though, we should say things are different," Denise said. "From this day, we *are* responsible. We start living up to some rules. No

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rapes, no murders. We're going to go by the Ten Commandments. Is everybody willing to swear to that? To put your hand on a Bible and swear?"

It seemed like a good idea, and every single one of us swore. Afterward we felt a new energy. We talked more, and inquired into each other, like we'd been strangers but now we were getting to know who we were.

February became March. Elmer got a second car going. We began provisioning for our trip. One day as I passed the courthouse I went inside. I knew the county had a spare flag, and I went down to the basement to find it. The light was dim, and I could hear the scurry of rodents, but they preferred the heaps of stored paper to the plastic-wrapped bundle that I found and clutched. I thought about my decades of work as a records-keeper. Everything I'd done was food for rats.

I tied a stout dowel-rod to the top of one of our two working cars, and we had a flag pole. "People won't shoot at Old Glory," I told Denise.

She smiled back at me. "Good thinking," she said.

The next day another storm came along and dumped half a foot of snow. We were back to full winter, back to being part of the icecap. We huddled in the old folks' home by the parlor fireplace and debated the only issue we had to talk about; whether to hurry south first thing after the roads cleared, or to wait until the weather was safe, which might not be until mid-May.

When that got tiresome, Denise pretended to be Richard Simmons and led us through some dance-exercises. We danced, we made beef stew, and we read the few oversize-print books in the parlor library. We had enough wits now to enjoy reading, and made forays for more material.

Between books we discussed the Golden Age. Now that Civilization was over, when was its finest hour? We had a guy; big, curly haired, gone East to make his name as a piano recitalist and came back after fifteen years to be a souse, but now he was sober. "Brand" was the name he never quite made, and Brand's theory was this: late eighties, early nineties. "I'm not sure of the precise year, but for a while we had Far Side cartoons in the paper, *plus* Calvin & Hobbes, *plus* Bloom County."

"I think it was more recent than that," I said. "Remember when the new Poik treatments came along? This county was half in retirement. After farming the biggest source of income was Social Security. The only news was who had died that week. Suddenly all that went into reverse. People left this old folks' home we're in now, and went back to being useful again."

"Yeah, but people were worried about Poik. It was going to bring on overpopulation," Denise said.

Elmer laughed bitterly and threw another log on the fire. "I guess we've solved *that* problem!"

"If the world recovers from Tarik's Disease it's going to be odd," Brand said. "There'll be breeders breeding like hell to get humanity back again, and there'll be the Poik gang. Immortals, I guess. Until we recover full technology, we won't be able to create any new immortals."

"We're not immortal. We're only too mortal," I said.

"You know what I mean, though. People who don't age."

Brand and I spent that night together, and in the morning I put on my watch and saw the numbers spinning the way they do when the battery's almost dead. "Do you remember the date from yesterday?" I asked. "Because from now on we've got to make calendar marks on the wall like Robinson Crusoe."

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The consensus was March 12. The authority of my K-Mart watch was gone, though, and that meant nobody argued any more for delaying our drive south. As soon as the roads cleared and it was April, we were gone, two cars, up that big bluff that was our first challenge, and then at thirty miles-per-hour into the unknown world between us and Chip's Cenex station.

At the station we found a filthy young girl, too conflicted to hide from us. She'd kept alive on her own for God-knows how long by grazing the rubbished aisles. Denise took and held her. "Before you rejoin humanity you're going to have to take a bath and get new clothes, and brush those teeth. Do you have any other clothes?"

No answer. The girl was feral, all she did was shake. A bath was a project; it took time to build a fire and boil water, meanwhile scouting for a tub and a girl-size wardrobe. We finished the day at the Cenex station, collecting plunder, like cartons of cigarettes from Chip's basement. "What's your name?" Denise kept asking the girl. Denise repeated her name and pointed us out: "Rachel, Elmer, Mitch, Randy, Brand, Norma. I'm sure *you've* got a name. I bet it's a pretty name, too."

We slept in the station. That night we heard gunshots off north, and the girl went into a little ball, her eyes squeezed shut. That morning she was eager to get into one of our cars and make sure we didn't leave her behind. After half an hour on the road, avoiding windfall and a dead cow, she told us her name.

Lurlie may have been Laura Lee or Lorelei, but we pronounced it her way. By the time we reached the next town, she was almost chatty, but only about topics like music and clothes, that had nothing to do with present realities.

The present realities included several burnt-out farms, but the snows had minimized winter fires, and the ground was soggy from spring melt. Most of what the human race had built was still standing. Some of it was still occupied. In the middle of this new town the occupants had arranged trash cans and fallen power-poles into a barrier. We stopped and got out and opened a path for our cars, and by then one of them came to parley, waving a little flag like the one on our lead car.

Inga was fat and frizzy and wore big dungarees, and she'd been a professor of Library Science at the state college here, before it lost accreditation and they shut it down. She wore glasses that she'd scrounged, having misplaced her contacts during the delirium stage of Tarik's Disease. Half-blind though she was, she led us to the one tank in town that had gas in it, and rounded up another three survivors. When we left for the South Dakota border we were a three-car convoy.

The next few days Inga was our best negotiator, because she looked so harmless. It wasn't just in the towns that we used her. Sometimes we passed farms and a car or a truck would come roaring out to join us. They didn't have to hurry. By the time we reached Nebraska we were an eighteen-vehicle convoy, and it takes eighteen cars and trucks a good long time to pass, somebody always getting stuck or breaking down.

Finding gas for so many was our biggest headache. It got worse as the convoy grew. In Nebraska we had to stop and send forays. We found fuel, yes, but we also picked up new people to add to our horde. We set off for Kansas, and Denise gestured behind her: "We really started something, didn't we? And nobody's shot at us. By God, that's the biggest miracle."

"Who's going to shoot at thirty-some cars?" I said.

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"It's the flag. After a winter of lonely survival, even the worst lunatic hermit wants America to come back, and we're it. We're the closest thing there is to a dream come true."

"God, that's sad," Elmer said.

"There's another road-block up ahead," Lurlie said.

We sent Inga to negotiate, and a new car joined the convoy, with news of gas ahead; farmer's gas from a tank next to her barn. By the time we got to Kansas we were so big the convoy got unwieldy, and growing with each day's progress. We had to break up and send cars ahead to find gas for the rest. Naturally, our car with the flag had to be one of the forward gang. Here we were, as far south as we'd been, in a place of violence according to last summer's radio, without the comfort of a multitude behind us, black thunderheads rolling up from the west. The land looked empty and burnt-over, and suddenly this guy popped up out of nowhere and invited us to his house for the night.

Connor was a horse-rancher. "It was a hobby, really," he said. "A rich man's hobby ranch, raising horses. But here they are, mostly alive. In the worst of the winter I had to shoot a lot of dogs, and coyotes too. They get frenzied. If they'd got in the barn they'd kill for the sake of killing."

Being on horseback was how he managed to surprise us, and coming from the east when we were watching the lightning off west. Connor shared his collector's comics for us to read that night by kerosene light, and we had a fine time waiting out the storm.

At breakfast Connor agreed to guide units of the convoy as they came by looking for gas. "Am I one of you, then?" he asked.

"Can you pack and bring your horses? All of them? I guarantee you won't slow us down, not the speeds we're going now," Denise said.

"We'll need horses in the long run," Elmer agreed. "Given we've got a couple of hundred people, someone should know enough about horses to help you."

I talk about Connor because he was the last to join us, and because he was one of those lucky guys; a golden boy from his youth. Money brings confidence and confidence brings more money, and his onward-and-upward character had survived even this horrible year mostly intact, though I notice he never spoke about his wife and kids. My occasional lover Brand had spent decades in a drunken downward spiral in New York. Brand and Connor were opposites.

That day we forged onward into central Kansas. For the first time we encountered real total abandonment, no last lunatics, nobody. Good weather had reached Kansas in March, and everyone who wanted to go south had already done so. The flowering dogwoods bloomed unnoticed. Birds converged in flocks whenever there was something dead near the road, and the windfall lay wherever it wanted, forcing us to stop and clear the road time and again. Dogs ran up, excited to see us, but in their confused pack mentality that excitement always turned bad, and sometimes we were forced to shoot. Only when we found a dog alone could we show it the old love, but there was something shy and skittish and not-quite-right about lonely dogs.

I wasn't the only one who drew analogies between dogs and humans. "You know, we've been afraid of the isolated nut cases," Denise said. "But those are the ones who've joined us. We really should be afraid when we come up against another pack of people like ourselves."

We reached Oklahoma and it happened. There were shots, and the bul-

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lets kicked up hunks of sod in the green lush grass. We stopped, not sure if we'd been missed on purpose. A man with long black hair shouted from a distance: "Send someone to parley!"

Inga wasn't with us. Her car was part of a group gone east to gas. It was Denise or me, and I figured it was my turn, so I took the long walk.

The guy was half white. He'd never have made a movie Indian anyhow, because he'd had the same problem as me; severe childhood acne. "How many are you?" he asked.

"We were eleven when we left North Dakota. Now we're maybe two hundred," I said.

"Welcome to the Tribe. Do you want to join?"

I was a little surprised. "Yeah, well—we *were* looking for a place, yes. We thought maybe Texas, but Oklahoma? Why not?"

"We've taken in two convoys already this spring," the man said. "All you have to do is accept. You get to vote, and we find you land to squat on."

"This isn't some weird cult thing, is it?" I asked.

The man shrugged. "Those folks are in Texas, not here. You're flying the flag from your car. That's our flag too. We've fought for it in all the wars, and we parade it in our powwows."

"I guess what we are, is the flag and the Ten Commandments," I said. "Nothing weirder than that. We don't really have a leader. We just grew."

"Same with us. We call ourselves a Tribe because we've got a lot of Indians, but we're all types mixed together; a Latin professor and an Irish guy with a honest-to-God brogue, and couple of drag queens from Tulsa. All types. We're probably a thousand or more."

"Are you having new elections anytime soon?" I asked.

"We're planning a powwow for the 4th of July," the man said. "That's when we'll choose new chiefs. Nine of them. They're our Senate and our Supreme Court. They pick one of themselves to be President."

"Close enough," I said.

The guy agreed. "It's a start."

I asked another question: "Are you involved in any wars we should know about?"

"Nah. We worry though, about crazy people in Texas. But then, maybe they're not really there. Maybe it's a myth. Someday we'll have to send scouts and see."

So that's the story of our convoy and us who started it, going back to the beginning. There's lots of land, and Brand and I got some to live on, although we're not lovers anymore. Denise and Elmer and Lurlie live next door. From what we've heard, Connor plans to run for chief and he'll get elected one of the nine, based on his bringing those horses down from his ranch near Topeka. He's the sort of person people like to vote for.

It's settling into my head that I might live. I might live for decades, even centuries. I've watched Civilization die, not paying full attention. I hope I do better, watching a new Civilization grow again. O

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If one photon leaps

Passing clearly through this gate Just as clearly through this gate

which way did it go?

—Timons Esaias

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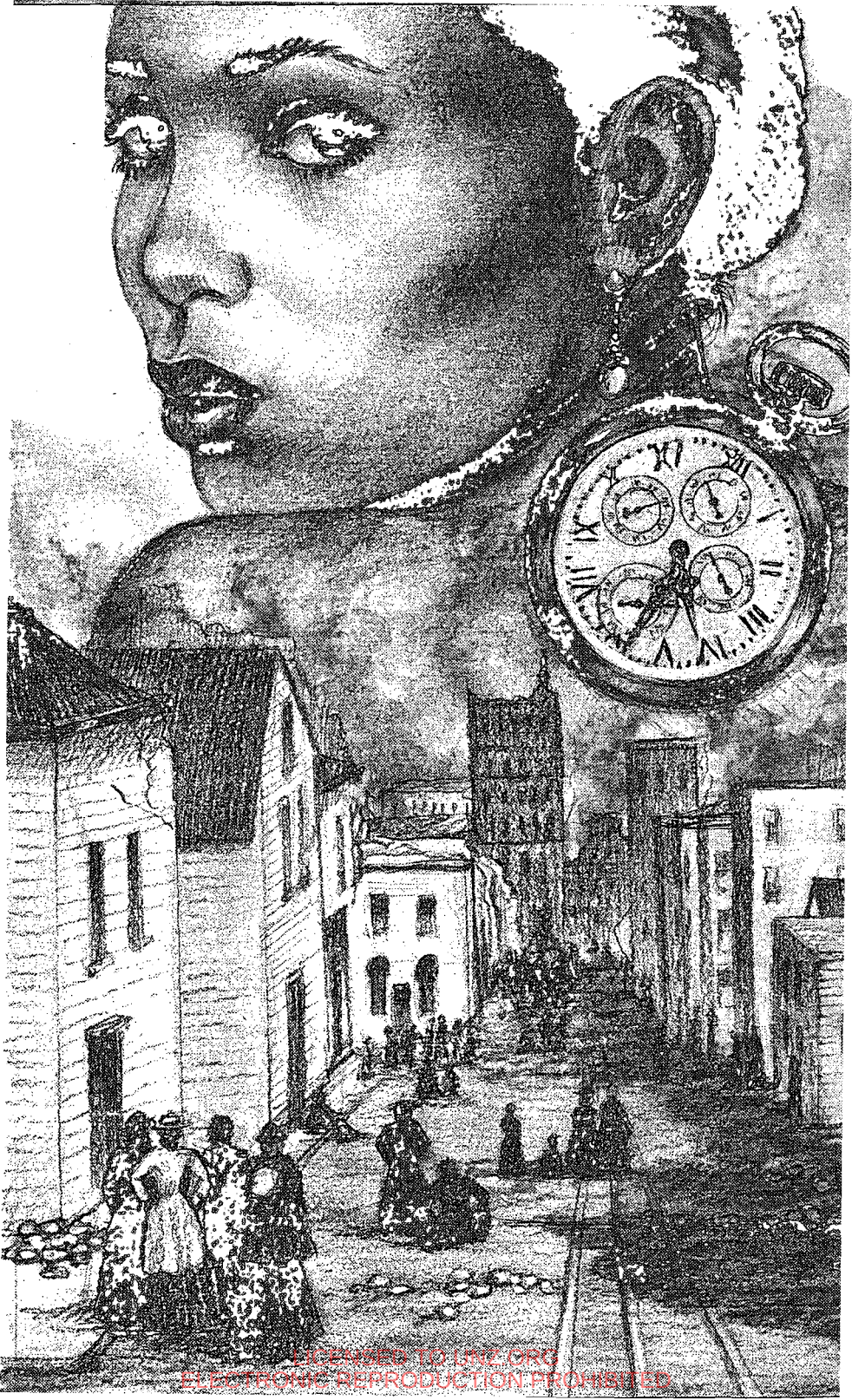

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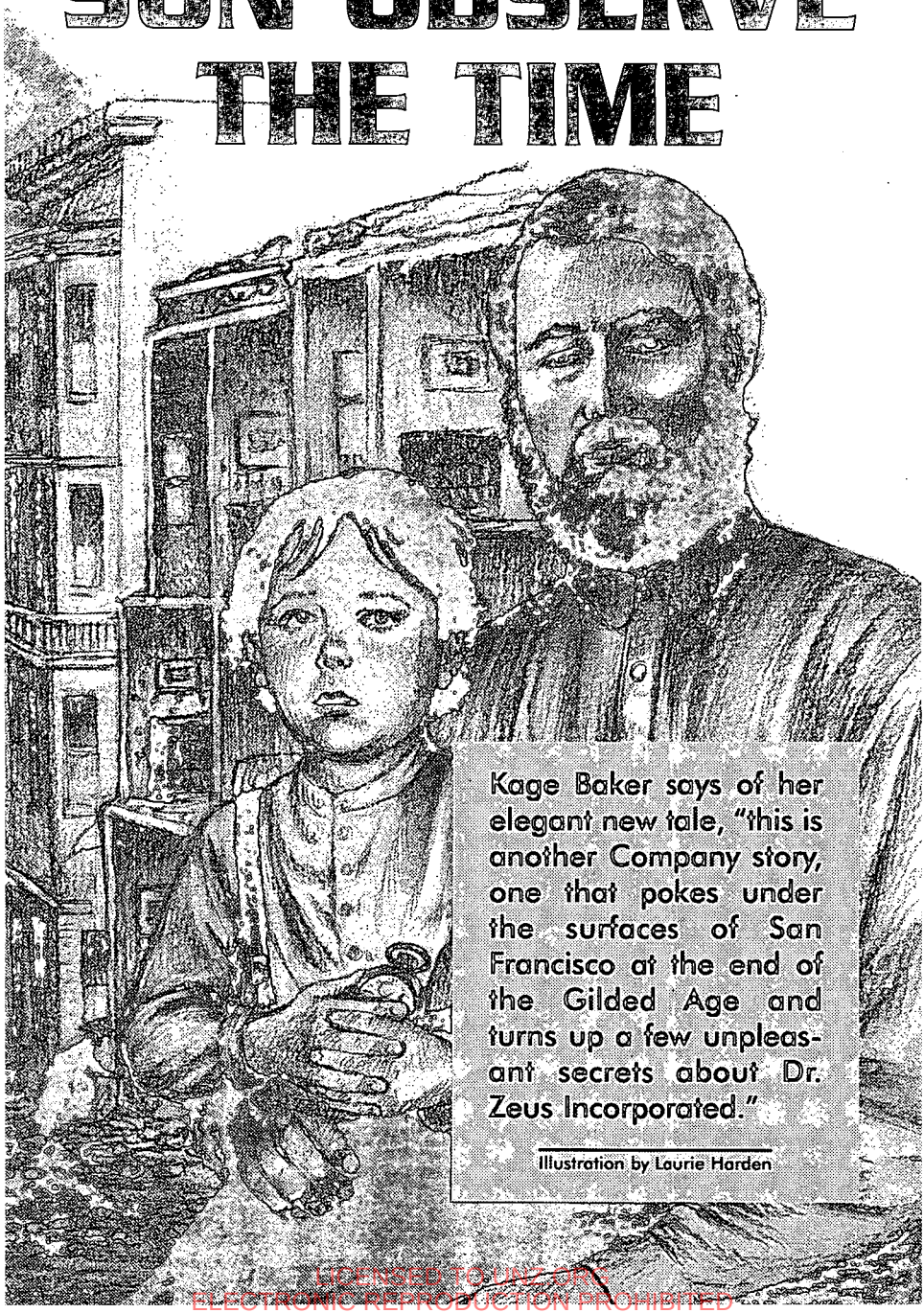
Kage Baker

SON OBSERVE THE TIME



Kage Baker says of her elegant new tale, "this is another Company story, one that pokes under the surfaces of San Francisco at the end of the Gilded Age and turns up a few unpleasant secrets about Dr. Zeus Incorporated."

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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On the eve of destruction we had oysters and champagne.

Don't suppose for a moment that we had any desire to lord it over the poor mortals of San Francisco, in that month of April in that year of 1906; but things weren't going to be so gracious there again for a long while, and we felt an urge to fortify ourselves against the work we were to do.

And who were *we*, you may ask? The present-time operatives of Dr. Zeus Incorporated, a twenty-fourth century cabal of investors who have presided over the development of immortality and time travel, amongst other things. Neither of those inventions are terribly practical, I regret to say; nevertheless they can be utilized to provide a satisfactory profit for Company shareholders. Assuming, of course, that we immortals—their servants—are able to perform our tasks in a satisfactory manner.

London before the Great Fire, Delhi before the Mutiny, even Chicago—I was there and I can tell you, it requires a great deal of mental and emotional self-discipline to live side by side with mortals in a Salvage Zone. You must look, daily, into the smiling faces of those who are to lose all, and walk beside them in the knowledge that nothing you can do will affect their fates. Even the most prosaic of places has a sort of haunted glory at such times; judge then how it looked to us, that gilded fantastical butterfly of a city, quite unprepared for its approaching holocaust.

The place was made even queerer by the fact that there were so many Company operatives there at the time. The very ether hummed with our transmissions. In any street you might have seen us dismounting from carriages or the occasional automobile, we immortal gentlemen tipping our derbies to the ladies, our immortal ladies responding with a graceful inclination of their picture hats, smiling as we met each other's terrified eyes. We dined at the Palace and as guests at Nob Hill mansions; promenaded in Golden Gate Park, drove out to Woodward Gardens, attended the theater and everywhere saw the pale set faces of our own kind, busy with their own particular preparations against what was to come.

Some of us had less pleasant places to go. I was grateful that I was not required to brave the Chinese labyrinth by Waverly Place, but my associate Pan had certain business there amongst the Celestials. I myself was obliged to venture, too many times, into the boarding-houses south of Market Street. Beneath the Fly Trap was a Company safe house and HQ; we'd meet there sometimes, Pan and I, at the end of a long day in our respective ghettoes, and we'd sit shaking together over a brace of stiff whiskies. Thus heartened, it was time for a costume change: dock laborer into gentleman for me, coolie into cook for him, and so home by cable car.

I lodged in two rooms on Bush Street. I will not say I slept there; one does not rest well on the edge of the maelstrom. But it was a place to keep one's trunk, and to operate the Company credenza necessary for facilitating the missions of those operatives whose case officer I was. Salvaging is a terribly complicated affair, requiring as it does that one hide in History's shadow until the last possible moment before snatching one's quarry from its preordained doom. One must be organized and thoroughly coordinated; and timing is everything.

On the morning of the tenth of April I was working there, sending a progress report, when there came a brisk knock at my door. Such was my concentration that I was momentarily unmindful of the fact that I had no mortal servants to answer it. When I heard the impatient tapping of a small foot on the step, I hastened to the door.

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I admitted Nan D'Araignee, one of our Art Preservation specialists. She is an operative of West African origin with exquisite features, slender and slight as a doll carved of ebony. I had worked with her briefly near the end of the previous century. She is quite the most beautiful woman I have ever known, and happily married to another immortal, a century before I ever laid eyes on her. Timing, alas, is everything.

"Victor." She nodded. "Charming to see you again."

"Do come in." I bowed her into my parlor, acutely conscious of its disarray. Her bright gaze took in the wrinkled laundry cast aside on the divan, the clutter of unwashed teacups, the half-eaten oyster loaf on the credenza console, six empty sauterne bottles and one smudgily thumbprinted wineglass. She was far too courteous to say anything, naturally, and occupied herself with the task of removing her gloves.

"I must apologize for the condition of the place," I stammered. "My duties have kept me out a good deal." I swept a copy of the *Examiner* from a chair. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you." She took the seat and perched there, hands folded neatly over her gloves and handbag. I pulled over another chair, intensely irritated at my clumsiness.

"I trust your work goes well?" I inquired, for there is of course no point in asking one of us if *we* are well. "And, er, Kalugin's? Or has he been assigned elsewhere?"

"He's been assigned to Marine Transport, as a matter of fact," she told me, smiling involuntarily. "We are to meet on the *Thunderer* afterward. I am so pleased! He's been in the Bering Sea for two years, and I've missed him dreadfully."

"Ah," I said. "How pleasant, then, to have something to look forward to in the midst of all this. . . ."

She nodded quickly, understanding. I cleared my throat and continued: "What may I do for you, Nan?"

She averted her gaze from dismayed contemplation of the stale oyster loaf and smiled. "I was told you might be able to assist me in requisitioning additional transport for my mission."

"I shall certainly attempt it." I stroked my beard. "Your present arrangements are unsuitable?"

"Inadequate, rather. You may recall that I'm in charge of Presalvage at the Hopkins Gallery. It seems our original estimates of what we can rescue there were too modest. At present I have five vans arranged for to evacuate the Gallery contents, but really we need more. Would it be possible to requisition a sixth? My own case officer was unable to assist me, but felt you might have greater success."

This was a challenge. Company resources were strained to the utmost on this operation, which was one of the largest on record. Every operative in the United States had been pressed into service, and many of the European and Asian personnel. A handsome allotment had been made for transport units, but needs were swiftly exceeding expectations.

"Of course I should like to help you," I replied cautiously, "if at all possible. You are aware, however, that horsedrawn transport utilization is impossible, due to the subsonic disturbances preceding the earthquake—and motor transports are, unfortunately, in great demand—"

A brewer's wagon rumbled down the street outside, rattling my windows. We both leaped to our feet, casting involuntary glances at the ceiling; then

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sat down in silent embarrassment. Mme. D'Araignee gave a little cough. "I'm so sorry—My nerves are simply—"

"Not at all, not at all, I assure you—one can't help flinching—"

"Quite. In any case, Victor, I understand the logistical difficulties involved; but even a handcart would greatly ease our difficulties. So many lovely and unexpected things have been discovered in this collection, that it really would be too awful to lose them to the fire."

"Oh, certainly." I got up and strode to the windows, giving in to the urge to look out and assure myself that the buildings hadn't begun to sway yet. Solid and seemingly as eternal as the pyramids they stood there, for the moment. I turned back to Mme. D'Araignee as a thought occurred to me. "Tell me, do you know how to operate an automobile?"

"But of course!" Her face lit up.

"It may be possible to obtain something in that line. Depend upon it, Madame, you will have your sixth transport. I shall see to it personally."

"I knew I could rely on you." She rose, all smiles. We took our leave of one another with a courtesy that belied our disquiet. I saw her out and returned to my credenza keyboard.

QUERY, I input, *RE: REQUISITION ADDTNL TRANSPORT MOTOR VAN OR AUTO? PRIORITY RE: HOPKINS INST.*

HOPKINS PROJECT NOT YOUR CASE, came the green and flashing reply.

NECESSARY, I input. *NEW DISCV OVRRIDE SECTION AUTH. PLEASE FORWARD REQUEST PRIORITY.*

WILL FORWARD.

That was all. So much for my chivalrous impulse, I thought, and watched as the transmission screen winked out and returned me to my status report on the Nob Hill Presalvage work. I resumed my entry of the Gilded Age loot tagged for preservation.

When I had transmitted it, I stood and paced the room uneasily. How long had I been hiding in here? What I wanted was a meal and a good stretch of the legs, I told myself sternly. Fresh air, in so far as that was available in any city at the beginning of this twentieth century. I scanned the oyster loaf and found it already pulsing with bacteria. Pity. After disposing of it in the dustbin I put on my coat and hat, took my stick and went out to tread the length of Bush Street with as bold a step as I could muster.

It was nonsense, really, to be frightened. I'd be out of the city well before the first shock. I'd be safe on air transport bound for London before the first flames rose. London, the other City. I could settle into a chair at my club and read a copy of *Punch* that wasn't a month old, secure in the knowledge that the oak beams above my head were fixed and immovable as they had been since the days when I'd worn a powdered wig, as they would be until German shells came raining down decades from now. . . .

Shivering, I dismissed thoughts of the Blitz. Plenty of *life* to think about, surely! Here were bills posted to catch my eye: I might go out to the Pavilion at Woodward's to watch the boxing exhibition—Jack Joyce and Bob Ward featured. There was delectable vaudeville at the Orpheum, I was assured, and gaiety girls out at the Chutes, to say nothing of a spectacular sideshow recreation of the Johnstown Flood . . . perhaps not in the best of taste, under the present circumstances.

I might imbibe Gold Seal Champagne to lighten my spirits, though I didn't think I would; Veuve Cliquot was good enough for me. Ah, but what

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about a bottle of Chianti, I thought, arrested by the bill of fare posted in the window of a corner restaurant. Splendid culinary fragrances wafted from within. Would I have grilled veal chops here? Would I go along Bush to the Poodle Dog for Chicken *Chaud-Froid Blanc*? Would I venture to Grant in search of yellow silk banners for duck roasted in some tiny Celestial kitchen? Then again, I knew of a Swiss place where the cook was a Hungarian, and prepared a light and crisply fried Wienerschnitzel to compare with any I'd had . . . or I might just step into a saloon and order another oyster loaf to take home. . . .

No, I decided, veal chops would suit me nicely. I cast a worried eye up at the building—pity this structure wasn't steel-framed—and proceeded inside.

It was one of those dark, robust places within, floor thickly strewn with fresh sawdust not yet kicked into little heaps. I took my table as any good operative does, back to the wall and a clear path to the nearest exit. Service was poor, as apparently their principal waiter was late today, but the wine was excellent. I found it bright on the palate, just what I'd wanted, and the chops when they came were redolent of herbs and fresh olive oil. What a consolation Appetite can be.

Yes, Life, that was the thing to distract one from unwise thoughts. Savor the wine, I told myself, observe the parade of colorful humanity, breathe in the fragrance of the joss sticks and the seafood and the gardens of the wealthy, listen to the smart modern city with its whirring steel parts at the service of its diverse inhabitants. The moment is all, surely.

I dined in some isolation, for the luncheon crowd had not yet emerged from the nearby offices and my host remained in the kitchen, arguing with the cook over the missing waiter's character and probable ancestry. Even as I amused myself by listening, however, I felt a disturbance approaching the door. No temblor yet, thank Heaven, but a tempest of emotions. I caught the horrifying mental images before ever I heard the stifled weeping. In another moment he had burst through the door, a young male mortal with a prodigious black mustache, quite nattily dressed but with his thick hair in wild disarray. As soon as he was past the threshold his sobs burst out unrestrained, at a volume that would have done credit to Caruso.

This brought his employer out of the back at once, blurting out the first phrases of furious denunciation. The missing waiter (for so he was) staggered forward and thrust out that day's *Chronicle*. The headlines, fully an inch tall, checked the torrent of abuse: *MANY LOSE THEIR LIVES IN GREAT ERUPTION OF VESUVIUS.*

The proprietor of the restaurant, struck dumb, went an ugly ashen color. He put the fingertips of one hand in his mouth and bit down hard. In a broken voice, the waiter described the horrors: Roof collapsed in church in his own village. His own family might even now lie dead, buried in ash. The proprietor snatched the paper and cast a frantic eye over the columns of print. He sank to his knees in the sawdust, sobbing. Evidently he had family in Naples, too.

I stared at my plate. I saw grey and rubbery meat, congealing grease, seared bone with the marrow turned black. In the midst of life we are in death, but it doesn't do to reflect upon it while dining.

"You must, please, excuse us, sir," the proprietor said to me, struggling to his feet. "There has been a terrible tragedy." He set the *Chronicle* beside my plate so I could see the blurred rotogravure picture of King Victor Emmanuel. *Report That Total Number Of Dead May Reach Seven Hundred*, I

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read. *Towns Buried Under Ashes and Many Caught in Ruined Buildings. MANY BUILDINGS CRUSHED BY ASHES.* Of course, I had known about the coming tragedy; but it was on the other side of the world, the business of other Company operatives, and I envied them that their work was completed now.

"I am so very sorry, sir," I managed to say, looking up at my host. He thought my pallor was occasioned by sympathy: he could not know I was seeing his mortal face like an apparition of the days to come, and it was grey and charring, for he lay dead in the burning ruins of a boarding house in the Mission District. Horror, yes, impossible not to feel horror, but one cannot empathize with them. One must not.

They went into the kitchen to tell the cook and I heard weeping break out afresh. Carefully I took up the newspaper and perused it. Perhaps there was something here that might divert me from the unpleasantness of the moment? Embezzlement. A crazed admirer stalking an actress. Charlatan evangelists. Grisly murder committed by two boys. Deadly explosion. Crazed derelict stalking a bank president. Los Angeles school principals demanding academic standards lowered.

I dropped the paper, and, leaving five dollars on the table, I fled that place.

I walked briskly, not looking into the faces of the mortals I passed. I rode the cable car, edging away from the mortal passengers. I nearly ran through the green expanse of Golden Gate Park, dodging around the mortal idlers, the lovers, the nurses wheeling infants in perambulators, until at last I stood on the shore of the sea. Tempting to turn to look at the fairy castles perched on its cliffs; tempting to turn to look at the carnival of fun along its grey sand margin, but the human comedy was the last thing I wanted just then. I needed, rather, the chill and level grace of the steel-colored horizon, sun-glistering, wide-expanding. The cold salt wind buffeted me, filled my grateful lungs. Ah, the immortal ocean.

Consider the instructive metaphor: Every conceivable terror dwells in her depths; she receives all wreckage, refuse, corruption of every kind, she pulls down into her depths human calamity indescribable: but none of this is any consideration to the sea. Let the screaming mortal passengers fight for room in the lifeboats, as the wreck belches flame and settles below the extinguishing wave; next morning she'll still be beautiful and serene, her combers no less white, her distances as blue, her seabirds no less graceful as they wheel in the pure air. What perfection, to be so heartless. An inspiration to any lesser immortal.

As I stood so communing with the elements, a mortal man came wading out of the surf. I judged him two hundred pounds of athletic stockbroker, muscles bulging under sagging wet wool, braving the icy water as an act of self-disciplinary sport. He stood for a moment on one leg, examining the sole of his other foot. There was something gladiatorial in his pose. He looked up and saw me.

"A bracing day, sir," he shouted.

"Quite bracing." I nodded and smiled. I could feel the frost patterns of my returning composure.

And so I boarded another streetcar and rode back into the mortal warren, and found my way by certain streets to the Barbary Coast. Not a place a gentleman cares to admit to visiting, especially when he's known the gilded beauties of old Byzantium or Regency-era wenches; the raddled pleasures

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available on Pacific Street suffered by comparison. But Appetite is Appetite, after all, and there is nothing like it to take one's mind off unpleasant thoughts.

"Your costume," the attendant pushed a pasteboard carton across the counter to me. "Personal effects and field equipment. Linen, trousers, suspenders, boots, shirt, vest, coat and hat." He frowned. "Phew! These should have been laundered. Would you care to be fitted with an alternate set?"

"That's all right." I took the offending rags. "The sweat goes with the role, I'm afraid. Irish laborer."

"Ah." He took a step backward. "Well, break a leg."

"Thank you."

Fifteen minutes later I emerged from a dressing room the very picture of an immigrant yahoo, uncomfortably conscious of my clammy and odiferous clothing. I sidled into the canteen, hoping there wouldn't be a crowd in the line for coffee. There wasn't, at that: most of the diners were clustered around one operative over in a corner, so I stood alone watching the Food Service technician fill my thick china mug from a dented steel coffee urn. The fragrant steam was a welcome distraction from my own fragrancy. I found a solitary table and warmed my hands on my dark brew there in peace, until an operative broke loose from the group and approached me.

"Say, Victor!"

I knew him slightly, an American operative so young one could scan him and still discern the scar tissue from his Augmentations. He was one of my Presalvagers.

"Good morning, Averill."

"Say, you really ought to listen to that fellow over there. He's got some swell stories." He paused only long enough to have his cup refilled, then came and pulled out a chair across from me. "Know who he is? He's the Guy Who Follows Caruso Around!"

"Is he?"

"Sure is. Music Specialist Grade One! That boy's wired for sound. He's caught every performance Caruso's ever given, even the church stuff when he was a kid. Going to get him in *Carmen* the night before You-Know-What, going to record the whole performance. He's just come back from planting receivers in the footlights! Say, have you gotten tickets yet?"

"No, I haven't. I'm not interested, actually."

"Not interested?" he exclaimed. "Why aren't you—how *can't* you be interested? It's *Caruso*, for God's sake!"

"I'm perfectly aware of that, Averill, but I've got a prior engagement. And, personally, I've always thought de Reszke was much the better tenor."

"De Reszke?" He scanned his records to place the name and, while doing so, absently took a great gulp of coffee. A second later he clutched his ear and gasped. "Christ Almighty!"

"Steady, man." I suppressed a smile. "You don't want to gulp beverages over 60 degrees Celsius, you know. There's some very complex circuitry placed near the Eustachian tube that gets unpleasantly hot if you do."

"Ow, ow, ow!" He sucked in air, staring at me with the astonishment of the very new operative. It always takes them a while to discover that immortality and intense pain are not strangers, indeed can reside in the same eternal house for quite lengthy periods of time. "Should I drink some ice water?"

"By no means, unless you want some real discomfort. You'll be all right in

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a minute or so. As I was about to say, I have some recordings of Jean de Reszke I'll transmit to you, if you're interested in comparing artists."

"Thanks, I'd like that." Averill ran a hasty self-diagnostic.

"And how is your team faring over at the New Brunswick, by the way? No cases of nerves, no blue devils?"

"Hell no." Averill started to lift his coffee again and then set it down respectfully.

"Doesn't bother you that the whole place will be ashes in a few days' time, and most of your neighbors dead?"

"No. We're all okay over there. We figure it's just a metaphor for the whole business, isn't it? I mean, sooner or later this whole world—" he made a sweeping gesture, palm outward— "as we know it, is going the same way, right? So what's it matter if it's the earthquake finishes it now or a wrecking ball someplace further on in time, right? Same thing with the people. It'll all come to the same thing in the end, so there's no reason to get personally upset about it, is there? No, sir. Specially since *we'll* all still be alive."

"A commendable attitude." I had a sip of my coffee. "And your work goes well?"

"Yes *sir*." He grinned. "You will be so proud of us burglary squad fellows when you get our next list. You wouldn't believe the stuff we're finding! All kinds of objets d'art, looks like. One-of-a-kind items, by God. Wait'll you see."

"I look forward to it." I glanced at my Chronometer and drank down the rest of my coffee, having waited for it to descend to a comfortable 59 degrees Celsius. "But, you know, Averill, it really won't do to think of yourselves as burglars."

"Well—that is—it's only a figure of speech, anyhow!" Averill protested, flushing. "A joke!"

"I'm aware of that, but I cannot emphasize enough that we are not stealing anything." I set my coffee cup down, aware that I sounded priggish, and looked sternly at him. "We're preserving priceless examples of late Victorian craftsmanship for the edification of future generations."

"I know." Averill looked at me sheepishly, "But—aw, hell, do you mean to say not one of those crystal chandeliers will wind up in some Facilitator General's private HQ somewhere?"

"That's an absurd idea," I told him, though I knew only too well it wasn't. Still, it doesn't do to disillusion one's subordinates too young. "And now, will you excuse me? I mustn't be late for work."

"All right. Be seeing you!"

As I left he rejoined the admiring throng about the fellow who was telling Caruso stories. My way lay along the bright tiled hall, steamy and echoing with the clatter of food preparation and busy operatives; then through the dark security vestibule, with its luminous screens displaying the world without; then through the concealed door that shut behind me and left no trace of itself to any eyes but my own. I drew a deep breath. Chill and silent morning air; no glimmer of light, yet, at least not down here in the alley. Half-past-five. This time three days hence—

I shivered and found my way out in the direction of the waterfront.

Not long afterward I arrived at the loading area where I had been desultorily employed for the last month. I made my entrance staggering slightly, doing my best to murder "You Can't Guess Who Flirted With Me" in a gravelly baritone.

The mortal laborers assembled there turned to stare at me. My best

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friend, an acquaintance I'd cultivated painstakingly these last three weeks, came forward and took me by the arm.

"Jesus, Kelly, you'd better stow that. Where've you been?"

I stopped singing and gave him a belligerent stare. "Marching in the Easter Parade, O'Neil."

"O, like enough." He ran his eyes over me in dismay. Francis O'Neil was thirty years old. He looked enough like me to have been taken for my somewhat bulkier, clean-shaven brother. "What're you doing this for, man? You know Herlihy doesn't like you as it is. You look like you've not been home to sleep nor bathe since Friday night!"

"So I have not." I dropped my gaze in hungover remorse.

"Come on, you poor stupid bastard, I've got some coffee in my dinner pail. Sober up. Was it a letter you got from your girl again?"

"It was." I let him steer me to a secluded area behind a mountain of crates and accepted the tin cup he filled for me with lukewarm coffee. "She doesn't love me, O'Neil. She never did. I can tell."

"Now, then, you're taking it all the wrong way, I'm sure. I can't believe she's stopped caring, not after all the things you've told me about her. Just drink that down, now. Mary made it fresh not an hour ago."

"You're a lucky man, Francis." I leaned on him and began to weep, slopping the coffee. He forbore with the patience of a saint and replied:

"Sure I am, Jimmy, And shall I tell you why? Because I know when to take my drink, don't I? I don't swill it down every payday and forget to go home, do I? No indeed. I'd lose Mary and the kids and all the rest of it, wouldn't I? It's self-control you need, Jimmy, and the sorrows in your heart be damned. Come on now. With any luck Herlihy won't notice the state you're in."

But he did, and a litany of scorn was pronounced on my penitent head. I took it with eyes downcast, turning my battered hat in my hands, and a dirtier nor more maudlin drunk could scarce have been seen in that city. I would be summarily fired, I was assured, but they needed men today so bad they'd employ even the likes of me, though by God *next* time—

When the boss had done excoriating me I was dismissed to help unload a cargo of copra from the *Nevadan*, in from the islands yesterday. I sniveled and tottered and managed not to drop anything much; O'Neil stayed close to me the whole day, watchful lest I pass out or wander off. He was a good friend to the abject caricature I presented; God knows why he cared. Well, I should repay his kindness, at least, though in a manner he would never have the opportunity to appreciate.

We sweated until four in the afternoon, when there was nothing left to take off the *Nevadan*; let go then with directions to the next day's job, and threats against slackers.

"Now, Kelly." O'Neil took my arm and steered me with him back toward Market Street. "I'll tell you what I think you ought to do. Go home and have a bit of a wash in the basin, right? Have you clean clothes? So, put on a clean shirt and trousers and see can you scrape some of that off your boots. Then come over to supper at our place, see. Mary's bought some sausages, we thought we'd treat ourselves to a dish of Coddle now that Lent's over. We've plenty."

"I will, then." I grasped his hand. "O'Neil, you're a lord for courtesy."

"I am not. Only go home and wash, man!"

We parted in front of the Terminal Hotel and I hurried back to the HQ to

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follow his instructions. This was just the sort of chance I'd been angling for since I'd sought out the man on the basis of the Genetic Survey team report.

An hour later, as cleanly as the character I played was likely to be able to make himself, I ventured along Market Street, heading down in the direction of the tenement where O'Neil and his family lived, the boarding houses in the shadow of the Palace Hotel. I knew their exact location, though O'Neil was of course unaware of that; accordingly he had sent a pair of his children down to the corner to watch for me.

They failed to observe my approach, however, and I really couldn't blame them; for proceeding down Market Street before me, moving slowly between the gloom of twilight and the electric illumination of the shop signs, was an apparition in a scarlet tunic and black shako.

It walked with the stiff and measured tread of the automaton it was pretending to be. The little ragged girl and her littler brother stared open-mouthed, watching its progress along the sidewalk. It performed a brief business of marching mindlessly into a lamppost and walking inexorably in place there a moment before righting itself and going on, but now on an oblique course toward the children.

I too continued on my course, smiling a little. This was delightful: a mortal pretending to be a mechanical toy being followed by a cyborg pretending to be a mortal.

There was a wild reverberation of mirth in the ether around me. One other of our kind was observing the scene, apparently; but there was a gigantic quality to the amusement that made me falter in my step. Who was that? That was someone I knew, surely. *Quo Vadis?* I transmitted. The laughter shut off like an electric light being switched out, but not before I got a sense of direction from it. I looked across the street and just caught a glimpse of a massive figure disappearing down an alley. My visual impression was of an old miner, one of the mythic founders of this city. Old gods walking? What a ridiculous idea, and yet . . . what a moment of panic it evoked, of mortal dread, quite irrational.

But the figure in the scarlet tunic had reached the children. Little Ella clutched her brother's hand, stock-still on the pavement: little Donal shrank behind his sister, but watched with one eye as the thing loomed over them.

It bent forward, slowly, in increments, as though a gear ratcheted in its spine to lower it down to them. Its face was painted white, with red circles on the cheeks and a red cupid's bow mouth under the stiff black mustaches. Blank glassy eyes did not fix on them, did not *seem* to see anything, but one white-gloved hand came up jerkily to offer the little girl a printed handbill.

After a frozen motionless moment she took it from him. "Thank you, Mister Soldier," she said in a high clear voice. The figure gave no sign that it had heard, but unbent slowly, until it stood ramrod-straight again; pivoted sharply on its heel and resumed its slow march down Market Street.

"Soldier go." Donal pointed. Ella peered thoughtfully at the handbill.

" *'CH-IL-DREN,'* " she read aloud. What an impossibly sweet voice she had. "And that's an Exclamation Point, there. *'Babe—Babies, In, To—Toy—'* "

" 'Toyland,' " I finished for her. She looked up with a glad cry.

"There you are, Mister Kelly. Donal, this is Mister Kelly. He is Daddy's good friend. Supper will be on the table presently. Won't you please come with us, Mister Kelly?"

"I should be delighted to." I touched the brim of my hat. They pattered

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away down an alley, making for the dark warren of their tenement, and I followed closely.

They were different physical types, the brother and sister. Pretty children, certainly, particularly Ella with her glossy black braids, with her eyes the color of the twilight framed by black lashes. But it is not beauty we look for in a child.

It was the boy I watched closely as we walked, a sturdy three-year-old trudging along holding tight to the girl's hand. I couldn't have told you the quality nor shade of his skin, nor his hair nor his eyes; I cared only that his head appeared to be a certain shape, that his little body appeared to fit a certain profile, that his limbs appeared to be a certain length in relation to one another. I couldn't be certain yet, of course: that was why I had maneuvered his father into the generous impulse of inviting me into his home.

They lived down a long dark corridor toward the back of the building, its walls damp with sweat, its air heavy with the odors of cooking, of washing, of mortal life. The door opened a crack as we neared it and then, slowly, opened wide to reveal O'Neil standing there in a blaze of light. The blaze was purely by contrast to our darkness, however; once we'd crossed the threshold, I saw that two kerosene lamps were all the illumination they had.

"There now, didn't I tell you she'd spot him?" O'Neil cried triumphantly. "Welcome to this house, Jimmy Kelly."

"God save all here." I removed my hat. "Good evening, Mrs. O'Neil."

"Good evening to you, Mr. Kelly." Mary O'Neil turned from the stove, bouncing a fretful infant against one shoulder. "Would you care for a cup of tea, now?" She was like Ella, if years could be granted Ella to grow tall and slender and wear her hair up like a soft thundercloud. But there was no welcoming smile for me in the grey eyes, for on the previous occasion we'd met I'd been disgracefully intoxicated—at least, doing my best to appear so. I looked down as if abashed.

"I'd bless you for a cup of tea, my dear, I would," I replied. "And won't you allow me to apologize for the condition I was in last Tuesday week? I'd no excuse at all."

"Least said, soonest mended." She softened somewhat at my obvious sobriety. Setting the baby down to whimper in its apple-box cradle, she poured and served my tea. "Pray seat yourself."

"Here." Ella pulled out a chair for me. I thanked her and sat down to scan the room they lived in. Only one room, with one window that probably looked out on an alley wall but was presently frosted opaque from the steam of the saucepan wherein their supper cooked. Indeed, there was a fine layer of condensation on everything: it trickled down the walls, it lay in a damp film on the oilcloth cover of the table and the blankets on the bed against the far wall. The unhappy infant's hair was moist and curling with it.

Had there been any ventilation it would have been a pleasant enough room. The table was set with good china, someone's treasured inheritance no doubt. The tiny potbellied stove must have been awkward to cook upon, but O'Neil had built a cabinet of slatwood and sheet tin next to it to serve as the rest of a kitchen. The children's trundle was stored tidily under the parents' bed. Next to the painted washbasin on the trunk, a decorous screen gave privacy to one corner. Slatwood shelves displayed the family's few valuables: a sewing-basket, a music box with a painted scene on its lid, a cheap mirror whose frame was decorated with glued-on seashells, a china dog. On the wall was a painted crucifix with a palm frond stuck behind it.

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O'Neil came and sat down across from me.

"You look grand, Jimmy." He thumped his fist on the table approvingly. "Combed your hair, too, didn't you? That's the boy. You'll make a gentleman yet."

"Daddy?" Ella climbed into his lap. "There was a soldier came and gave us this in the street. Will you ever read me what it says? There's more words than I know, see." She thrust the handbill at him. He took it and held it out before him, blinking at it through the steamy air.

Here I present the printed text he read aloud, without his many pauses as he attempted to decipher it (for he was an intelligent man, but of little education):

CHILDREN!
Come see the Grand Fairy Extravaganza BABES IN TOYLAND
Music by Victor Herbert
Book by Glen MacDonough
Staged by Julian Mitchell
Ignacio Martinetti and 100 Others! Coming by Special Train of Eight Cars!
Biggest Musical Production San Francisco Has Seen In Years!

An Invitation from Mother Goose Herself:

MY dear little Boys and Girls,

I DO hope you will behave nicely so that your Mammas and Papas will treat you to a performance of Mr. Herbert's lovely play Babes in Toyland at the Columbia Theater, opening Monday, the 16th of April. Why, my dears, it's one of the biggest successes of the season and has already played for ever so many nights in such far-away cities as New York, Chicago, and Boston. Yes, you really must be good little children, and then your dear parents will see that you deserve an outing to visit me. For, make no mistake, I myself, the only true and original MOTHER GOOSE, shall be there upon the stage of the Columbia Theater. And so shall so many of your other friends from my delightful rhymes such as Tom, Tom the Piper's Son, Bo Peep, Contrary Mary, and Red Riding Hood. The curtain will rise upon Mr. Mitchell's splendid production, with its many novel effects, at eight o'clock sharp.

OF course, if you are very little folks you are apt to be sleepyheads if kept up so late, but that need not concern your careful parents, for there will be a matinee on Saturday at two o'clock in the afternoon.

WON'T you please come to see me? Your affectionate friend, Mother Goose.

"Oh, dear," sighed Mary.

"Daddy, can we go?" Ella's eyes were alight with anticipation. Donal chimed in:

"See Mother Goose, Daddy!"

"We can't afford it, children." Mary's mouth was a set line. She took the saucepan off the stove and began to ladle a savory dish of sausage, onions, potatoes and bacon onto the plates. "We've got a roof over our heads and food for the table. Let's be thankful for that."

Ella closed her little mouth tight like her mother's, but Donal burst into tears. "I wanna go see Mother Goose!" he howled.

O'Neil groaned. "Your mother is right, Donal. Daddy and Mummy don't have the money for the tickets, can you understand that?"

"You oughtn't to have read out that bill," said Mary in a quiet voice.

"I want go see the Soldier!"

"Donal, hush now!"

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"Donal's the boy for me," I said, leaning forward and reaching out to him. "Look, Donal Og, what's this you've got in your ear?"

I pretended to pull forth a bar of Ghirardelli's. Ella clapped her hands to her mouth. Donal stopped crying and stared at me with perfectly round eyes.

"Look at that! Would you ever have thought such a little fellow'd have such big things in his ears? Come sit with your Uncle Jimmy, Donal." I drew him onto my lap. "And if you hush your noise, perhaps Mummy and Daddy'll let you have sweeties, eh?" I set the candy in the midst of the oilcloth, well out of his reach.

"Bless you, Jimmy," said O'Neil.

"Well, and isn't it the least I can do? Didn't know I could work magic, did you, Ella?"

"Settle down, now." Mary set out the dishes. "Frank, it's time to say Grace."

O'Neil made the sign of the Cross and intoned, with the little ones mumbling along, "Bless-us-O-Lord-and-these-Thy-gifts-which-we-are-about-to-receive-from-Thy-bounty-through-Christ-Our-Lord-Amen."

Mary sat down with us, unfolding her threadbare napkin. "Donal, come sit with Mummy."

"Be easy, Mrs. O'Neil, I don't mind him." I smiled at her. "I've a little brother at home he's the very image of. Where's his spoon? Here, Donal Og, you eat with me."

"I don't doubt they look alike." O'Neil held out his tumbler as Mary poured from a pitcher of milk. "Look at you and me. Do you know, Mary, that was the first acquaintance we had—? Got our hats mixed up when the wind blew 'em both off. We wear just the same size."

"Fancy that."

So we dined, and an affable mortal man helped little Donal make a mess of his potatoes whilst chatting with Mr. and Mrs. O'Neil about such subjects as the dreadful expense of living in San Francisco and their plans to remove to a cheaper, less crowded place as soon as they'd saved enough money. The immortal machine that sat at their table was making a thorough examination of Donal, most subtly: an idle caress of his close-cropped little head measured his skull size, concealed devices gauged bone length and density and measured his weight to the pound; data was analyzed and preliminary judgment made: Optimal Morphology. Augmentation Process Possible. Classification pending Blood Analysis and Spektral Diagnosis.

"That's the best meal I've had in this country, Mrs. O'Neil," I told her as we rose from the table.

"How kind of you to say so, Mr. Kelly," she replied, collecting the dishes.

"Chocolate, Daddy?" Donal stretched out his arm for it. O'Neil tore open the waxed paper and broke off a square. He divided it into two and gave one to Donal and one to Ella.

"Now, you must thank your Uncle Jimmy, for this is good chocolate and cost him dear."

"Thank you Uncle Jimmy," they chorused, and Ella added, "But he got it by magic. It came out of Donal's ear. I saw it."

O'Neil rubbed his face wearily. "No, Ella, it was only a conjuring trick. Remember the talk we had about such things? It was just a trick. Wasn't it, Jimmy?"

"That's all it was, sure," I agreed. She looked from her father to me and back.

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"Frank, dear, will you help me with these?" Mary had stacked the dishes in a washpan and sprinkled soap flakes in.

"Right. Jimmy, will you mind the kids? We're just taking these down to the tap."

"I will indeed," I said, and thought: *Thank* you *very much, mortal man, for this opportunity.* The moment the door closed behind them I had the device out of my pocket. It looked rather like a big old-fashioned watch. I held it out to the boy.

"Here you go, Donal, here's a grand timepiece for you to play with."

He took it gladly. "There's a train on it!" he cried. I turned to Ella.

"And what can I do for you, darling?"

She looked at me with considering eyes. "You can read me the funny papers." She pointed to a neatly stacked bundle by the stove.

"With pleasure." I seized them up and we settled back in my chair, pulling a lamp close. The baby slept fitfully, I read to Ella about Sambo and Tommy Pip and Herr Spiegleburger, and all the while Donal pressed buttons and thumbed levers on the diagnostic toy. It flashed pretty lights for him, it played little tunes his sister was incapable of hearing; and then, as I had known it would, it bit him.

"Ow!" He dropped it and began to cry, holding out his tiny bleeding finger.

"O, dear, now, what's that? Did it stick you?" I put his sister down and got up to take the device back. "Tsk! Look at that, the stem's broken." It vanished into my pocket. "What a shame. O, I'm sorry, Donal Og, here's the old hankie. Let's bandage it up, shall we? There, there. Doesn't hurt now, does it?"

"No," he sniffled. "I want another chocolate."

"And so you'll have one, for being a brave boy." I snapped off another square and gave it to him. "Ella, let's give you another as well, shall we? What have you found there?"

"It's a picture about Mother Goose." She had spread out the Children's Page on the oilcloth. "Isn't it? That says Mother Goose right there."

I looked over her shoulder. "*Pictures from Mother Goose,*" I read out, "*Hot Cross Buns. Paint the Seller of Hot Cross Buns.* Looks like it's a contest, darling. They're asking the kiddies to paint in the picture and send it off to the paper to judge who's done the best one."

"Is there prize money?" She had an idea.

"Two dollars for the best one," I read, pulling at my lower lip uneasily. "And paintboxes for everyone else who enters."

She thought that over. Dismay came into her face. "But I haven't got a paintbox to color it with at all! O, that's stupid! Giving paintboxes out to kids that's got them already. O, that's not fair!" She shook with stifled anger.

"What's not fair?" Her mother backed through the door, holding it open for O'Neil with the washpan.

"Only this Mother Goose thing here," I said.

"You're never on about going to that show again, are you?" said Mary sharply, coming and taking her daughter by the shoulders. "Are you? Have you been wheedling at Mr. Kelly?"

"I have not!" the little girl cried in a trembling voice.

"She hasn't, Mrs. O'Neil, only it's this contest in the kids' paper," I hastened to explain. "You have to have a set of paints to enter it, see."

Mary looked down at the paper. Ella began to cry quietly. Her mother gathered her up and sat with her on the edge of the bed, rocking her back and forth.

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"O, I'm so sorry, Ella dear, Mummy's so sorry. But you see, now, don't you, the harm in wanting such things? You see how unhappy it's made you? Look how hard Mummy and Daddy work to feed you and clothe you. Do you know how unhappy it makes us when you want shows and paintboxes and who knows what, and we can't give them to you? It makes us despair. That's a Mortal Sin, despair is."

"I want to see the fairies," wept the little girl.

"Dearest dear, there aren't any fairies! But surely it was the Devil himself you met out in the street, that gave you that wicked piece of paper and made you long after vain things. Do you understand me? Do you see why it's wicked, wanting things? It kills the soul, Ella."

After a long gasping moment the child responded, "I see, Mummy." She kept her face hidden in her mother's shoulder. Donal watched them uncertainly, twisting the big knot of handkerchief on his finger. O'Neil sat at the table and put his head in his hands. After a moment he swept up the newspaper and put it in the stove. He reached into the slatwood cabinet and pulled a bottle of Wilson's Whiskey up on the table, and got a couple of clean tumblers out of the washpan.

"Will you have a dram, Kelly?" he offered.

"Just the one." I sat down beside him.

"Just the one," he agreed.

You must not empathize with them.

When I let myself into my rooms on Bush Street, I checked my messages. A long blue column of them pulsed on the credenza screen. Most of it was the promised list from Averill and his fellows; I'd have to pass that on to our masters as soon as I'd reviewed it. I didn't feel much like reviewing it just now, however.

There was also a response to my request for another transport for Mme. D'Araignee: *DENIED. NO ADDITIONAL VEHICLES AVAILABLE. FIND ALTERNATIVE.*

I sighed and sank into my chair. My honor was at stake. From a drawer at the side of the credenza I took another Ghirardelli bar and, scarcely taking the time to tear off the paper, consumed it in a few greedy bites. Waiting for its soothing properties to act, I paged through a copy of the *Examiner*. There were automobile agencies along Golden Gate Avenue. Perhaps I could afford to purchase one out of my personal operation's expense account?

But they were shockingly expensive in this city. I couldn't find one for sale, new or used, for less than a thousand dollars. Why couldn't *her* case officer delve into his own pocket to deliver the goods? I verified the balance of my account. No, there certainly wasn't enough for an automobile in there. However, there was enough to purchase four tickets to "Babes in Toyland."

I accessed the proper party and typed in my transaction request.

TIX UNAVAILABLE FOR 041606 EVENT, came the reply. *041706 AVAILABLE OK?*

OK, I typed. *PLS DEBIT & DELIVER.*

DEBITED. TIX IN YR BOX AT S MKT ST HQ 600 HRS 041606.

TIBI GRATIAS! I replied, with all sincerity.

DIE DULCE FRUERE. OUT.

Having solved one problem, an easy solution to the other suggested itself to me. It involved a slight inconvenience, it was true: but any gentleman would readily endure worse for a lady's sake.

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My two rooms on Bush Street did not include the luxury of a bath, but the late Mr. Adolph Sutro had provided an alternative pleasure for his fellow citizens: the Baths, which surely could have existed only in that city, in that time.

Just north of Cliff House Mr. Sutro had purchased a rocky little purgatory of a cove, cleaned the shipwrecks out of it and proceeded to shore it up against the more treacherous waves with several thousand barrels of cement. Having constructed not one but six saltwater pools of a magnificence to rival old Rome, he had proceeded to enclose it in a crystal palace affair of no less than four acres of glass.

Ah, but this wasn't enough for San Francisco! The entrance, on the hill above, was as near a Greek temple as modern artisans could produce; through the shrine one wandered along the museum gallery lined with exhibits both educational and macabre and descended a vast staircase lined with palm trees to the main level, where one might bathe, exercise in the gymnasium or attend a theater performance. Having done all this, one might then dine in the restaurant.

However, my schedule today called for nothing more strenuous than bathing. Ten minutes after descending the grand staircase I was emerging from my changing room (one of five hundred), having soaped, showered and togged myself out in my rented bathing suit, making my way toward the nearest warm-water pool under the bemused eyes of several hundred mortal idlers sitting in the bleachers above.

I was not surprised to see another of my own kind backstroking manfully across the green water; nothing draws the attention of an immortal like sanitary conveniences. I was rather startled when I recognized the man, however, not having seen him since some time in the sixteenth century. Lewis is nothing more than a Literary Preservation Specialist, rather a sad-looking little fellow with a noble profile; not in my class, of course, but a gentleman for all that.

He felt my regard and glanced up, seeing me at once. He smiled and waved.

Victor! he broadcast. *How nice to see you again.*

It's Lewis, isn't it? I responded, though I knew his name perfectly well, and far more of his history than he knew himself. I had been assigned to monitor his activities once, to my everlasting shame. Still, it had been centuries, and he had never shown any sign of recovering certain memories. I hoped, for his sake, that such was the case. Memory effacement is not a pleasant experience.

He pulled himself up on the coping of the pool and swept his wet hair out of his eyes. I stepped to the edge, took the correct diver's stance and leapt in, transmitting through bubbles: *So you're here as well? Presalvaging books, I suppose?*

The Mercantile Library, he affirmed, and there was nothing in his pleasant tone to indicate he'd remembered what I'd done to him at Eurobase One.

God! That must be a Herculean effort, I responded, surfacing.

He transmitted rueful amusement. *You've heard of it, I suppose?*

Rather, I replied, practicing my breast stroke. *All those Comstock Lode silver barons went looting the old family libraries of Europe, didn't they? Snatched up medieval manuscripts at a tenth their value from impoverished Venetian princes, I believe? Fabulously rare first editions from London antiquarians?*

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Something like that, he replied. *And brought them back home to the States for safekeeping.*

Ha!

Well, how were they to know? Lewis made an expressive gesture taking in the vast edifice around us. *Mr. Sutro himself had a Shakespeare first folio. What a panic it's been tracking* that *down! And you?*

I'm negotiating for a promising-looking young recruit. Moreover, I drew Nob Hill detail, I replied casually. *I've coordinated quite a team of talented youngsters set to liberate the premises of Mssrs. Towne, Crocker, Huntington et al. as soon as the lights are out. All manner of costly bric-a-brac has been tagged for rescue—Chippendales, Louis Quatorzes—to say nothing of jewels and cash.*

My, that sounds satisfying. You'll never guess what I found, only last night! Lewis transmitted, looking immensely pleased with himself.

Something unexpected? I responded.

He edged forward on the coping gleefully. *Yes, you might say so. Just some old papers that had been mislaid by an idiot named Pompeo Leoni and bound into the wrong book. Just something jotted down by an elderly left-handed Italian gentleman!*

Not Da Vinci? I turned in the water to stare at him, genuinely impressed.

Who else? Lewis nearly hugged himself in triumph. *And! Not just any doodlings or speculation from the pen of Leonardo, either. Something of decided interest to the Company! It seems he devoted some serious thought to the construction of articulated human limbs—a clockwork arm, for example, that could be made to perform various tasks!*

I've heard something of the sort, I replied, swimming back toward him.

Yes, well, he seems to have taken the idea further. Lewis leaned down in a conspiratorial manner. *From a human arm he leapt to the idea of an entire articulated human skeleton of bronze, and wondered whether the human frame might not be merely imitated but improved in function!*

By Jove! Was the man anticipating androids? I reached the coping and leaned on it, slicking back my hair.

No! No! He was chasing another idea entirely, Lewis insisted. *Shall I quote? I rather think I ought to let him express his thoughts.* He leaned back and, with a dreamy expression, transmitted in flawless fifteenth-century Tuscan: ***It has been observed that the presence of metal is not in all cases inimical to the body of man, as we may see in earrings, or in crossbow bolts, spearpoints, pistol balls, and other detritus of war that have been known to enter the flesh and remain for some years without doing the bearer any appreciable harm, or indeed in that practice of physicians wherein a small pellet of gold is inserted into an incision made near an aching joint, and the sufferer gains relief and ease of movement thereby.***

Take this idea further and think that a shattered bone might be replaced with a model of the same bone cast in bronze, identical with or even superior to its original.

Go further and say that where one bone might be replaced, so might the skeleton entire, and if the articulation is improved upon the man might attain a greater degree of physical perfection than he was born with.

The flaw in this would be the man's pain and the high likelihood he would die before surgery of such magnitude could be carried out.

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Unless we are to regard the theory of alchemists who hold that the Philosopher's Stone, once attained, would transmute the imperfect flesh to perfection, a kind of supple gold that lives and breathes, and by this means the end might be obtained without cutting, the end being immortality. Lewis opened his eyes and looked at me expectantly. I smacked my hand on the coping in amusement.

By Jove! I repeated. *How typical of the Maestro. So he was all set to invent* us, *was he?*

To say nothing of hip replacements!

But what a find for the Company, Lewis!

Of course, to give you a real idea of the text I ought to have presented it like this: Lewis began to rattle it out backward. I shook my head, laughing and holding up my hands in sign that he should stop. After a moment or two he trailed off, adding: *I don't think it loses much in translation, though.*

I shook my head. *You know, old man, I believe we're treading rather too closely to a temporal paradox here. Just as well the Company will take possession of that volume, and not some inquisitive mortal! What if it had inspired someone to experiment with biomechanicals a century or so too early?*

Ah! No, you see, since History can't be changed. We're safe enough, Lewis pointed out. *As far as History records those Da Vinci pages, it records them as being lost in the Mercantile Library fire. The circle is closed. All the same, I imagine it was a temptation for any operatives stationed near Amboise in Da Vinci's time. Wouldn't you have wanted to seek the old man out as he lay dying, and tell him that something would be done with this particular idea, at least? Immortality and human perfection!*

Of course I'd have been tempted; but I shook my head. *Not unless I cared to face a court-martial for a security breach.*

Lewis shivered in his wet wool and slid back into the water. I turned on my back and floated, considering him.

The temperature doesn't suit you? I inquired.

Oh . . . they've got the frigidarium all right, but the calidaria here aren't really hot enough, Lewis explained. *And of course there's no sudatorium at all.*

Nor any slaves for a good massage, either, I added, glancing up at the mortal onlookers. *Sic transit luxuria, alas.* Lewis smiled faintly; he had never been comfortable with mortal servants, I remembered. Odd, for someone who began mortal life as a Roman, or at least a Romano-Briton.

Weren't you recruited at Bath. . . ? I inquired, leaning on the coping.

Aquae Sulis, it was then, Lewis informed me. *The public baths there.*

Of course. I remember now! You were rescued from the temple. Intercepted child sacrifice, I imagine?

Oh, good heavens, no! The Romans never did that sort of thing. No, I was just somebody's little unwanted holiday souvenir left in a blanket by the statue of Apollo. Lewis shrugged, and then began to grin. *I hadn't thought about it before, but this puts a distinctly Freudian slant on my visits here! Returning to the womb in time of stress? I was only a few hours old when the Company took me, or so I've always been told.*

I laughed and set off on a lap across the pool. *At least you were spared any memories of mortal life.*

That's true, he responded, and then his smile faded. *And yet, you know, I think I'm the poorer for that. The rest of you may have some harrowing memories, but at least you know what it was to be mortal.*

I assure you it's nothing to be envied, I informed him. He nodded in con-

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cession of my point and set out across the pool himself, resuming his backstroke.

I think I would have preferred the experience, all the same, he insisted. *I'd have liked a father—or mother—figure in my life. At the very least, those of you rescued at an age to remember it have a sort of filial relationship with the immortal who saved you. Haven't you?*

I regret to disillusion you, sir, but that is absolutely not true, I replied firmly.

Really? He dove and came up for air, gasping. *What a shame. Bang goes another romantic illusion. I suppose we're all just orphans of one storm or another!*

At that moment a pair of mortals chose to roughhouse, snorting and chuckling as they pummeled each other in their seats in the wooden bleachers; one of them broke free and ran, scrambling apelike over the seats, until he lost his footing and fell with a horrendous crash that rolled and thundered in the air, echoing under the glassed dome, off the water and wet coping.

I saw Lewis go pale; I imagine my own countenance showed reflexive panic. After a frozen moment Lewis drew a deep breath.

"One storm or another," he murmured aloud. "Nothing to be afraid of here, after all. Is there? This structure will survive the quake. History says it will. Nothing but minor damage, really."

I nodded. Then, struck in one moment by the same thought, we lifted our horrified eyes to the ceiling, with its one hundred thousand panes of glass.

"I believe I've got a rail car to catch," I apologized, vaulting to the coping with what I hoped was not undignified haste.

"I've a luncheon engagement myself," Lewis said, gasping as he sprinted ahead of me to the grand staircase.

On the 16th of April I entertained friends, or at least my landlady received that impression; and what quiet and well-behaved fellows the gentlemen were, and how plain and respectable the ladies! No cigars, no raucous laughter, no drunkenness at all. Indeed, Mrs. McCarty assured me she would welcome them as lodgers at any time in the future, should they require desirable Bush Street rooms. I assured her they would be gratified at the news. Perhaps they might have been, if her boarding house were still standing in a week's time. History would decree otherwise, regrettably.

My sitting room resembled a council of war, with its central table on which was spread a copy of the Sanborn map of the Nob Hill area, up-to-date from the previous year. My subordinates stood or leaned over the table, listening intently as I bent with red chalk to delineate the placement of Hush Field generators.

"The generators will arrive in a baker's van at the corner of Clay and Taylor Streets at midnight precisely," I informed them. "Delacort, your team will approach from your station at the end of Pleasant Street and take possession of them. There will be five generators. I want them placed at the following intersections: Bush and Jones, Clay and Jones, Clay and Powell, Bush and Powell and on California midway between Taylor and Mason." I put a firm letter X at each site. "The generators should be in place and switched on by no later than five minutes after midnight. Your people will remain in place to remove the generators at half-past three exactly, returning them to the baker's van, which will depart promptly. At that moment a

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private car will pull up to the same location to transport your team to the central collection point on Ocean Beach. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, sir," Delacort saluted. Averill looked at her slightly askance and turned a worried face to me.

"What're they going to do if some cop comes along and wants to know what they're doing there at that time of night?"

"Any cop coming in range of the Hush Field will pass out, dummy," Philemon informed him. I frowned and cleared my throat. Cinema Standard (the language of the schoolroom) is not my preferred mode of expression.

"If you please, Philemon!"

"Yeah, sorry—"

"Your team will depart from their station at Joice Street at five minutes after midnight and proceed to the intersection of Mason and Sacramento, where a motorized drayer's wagon will be arriving. You will be responsible for the contents of the Flood mansion." I outlined it in red. "Your driver will provide you with a sterile containment receptacle for Item Number Thirty-Nine on your acquisitions list. Kindly see to it that this particular item is salvaged first and delivered to the driver separately."

"What's Item Thirty-Nine?" Averill inquired. There followed an awkward silence. Philemon raised his eyebrows at me. Company policy discourages field operatives from being told more than they strictly need to know regarding any given posting. Upon consideration, however, it seemed wisest to answer Averill's question; there was enough stress associated with this detail as it was without adding mysteries. I cleared my throat.

"The Flood mansion contains a 'Moorish' smoking room," I informed him. "Among its features is a lump of black stone carefully displayed in a glass case. Mr. Flood purchased it under the impression that it is an actual piece of the Qaaba from Mecca, chipped loose by an enterprising Yankee adventurer. He was, of course, defrauded; the stone is in fact a meteorite, and preliminary spectrographic analysis indicates it originated on Mars."

"Oh," said Averill, nodding sagely. I did not choose to add that plainly visible on the rock's surface is a fossilized crustacean of an unknown kind, or that the rock's rediscovery (in a museum owned by Dr. Zeus, incidentally) in the year 2210 will galvanize the Mars Colonization Effort into making real progress at last.

I bent over the map again and continued:

"All the items on your list are to be loaded into the wagon by twenty minutes after three. At that time, the wagon will depart for Ocean Beach and your team will follow in the private car provided. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Rodrigo, your team will depart from their Taylor Street station at five minutes after midnight as well. Your wagon will arrive at the corner of California and Taylor; you will proceed to salvage the Huntington mansion," I marked it on the map. "Due to the nature of your quarry you will be allotted ten additional minutes, but all listed items must be loaded and ready for removal by half-past-Three, at which time your private transport will arrive. Upon arrival at Ocean Beach you will be assisted by Philemon's team, who will already (I should hope) have loaded most of their salvage into the waiting boats."

"Yes, sir." Rodrigo made a slight bow.

"Freytag, your team will be stationed on Jones Street. You depart at five after midnight, like the rest, and your objective is the Crocker mansion,

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here." Freytag bent close to see as I shaded in her area. "Your wagon will pull up to Jones and California; you ought to be able to fill it in the allotted time of two hours and fifteen minutes precisely, and be ready to depart for Ocean Beach without incident. Loong? Averill?"

"Sir!" Both immortals stood to attention.

"Your teams will disperse from their stations along Clay and Pine Streets and salvage the lesser targets shown here, here, here, and here—" I chalked circles around them. "I leave to your best judgment individual personnel assignments. Two wagons will arrive on Clay Street at one o'clock precisely and two more will arrive on Pine five minutes later. You ought to find them more than adequate for your purposes. You will need to do a certain amount of running to and fro to coordinate the efforts of your ladies and gentlemen, but it can't be helped."

"I don't anticipate difficulties, sir." Loong assured me.

"No indeed; but remember the immensity of this event shadow." I set down the chalk and wiped my hands on a handkerchief. "Your private transports will be waiting at the corner of Bush and Jones by half-past three. Please arrive promptly."

"Yes, *sir*." Averill looked earnest.

"In the entirely likely event that any particular team completes its task ahead of schedule, and has free space in its wagon after all the listed salvage has been accounted for, I will expect that team to lend its assistance to Mme. D'Arraignee and her teams at the Mark Hopkins Institute." I swept them with a meaningful stare. "Gentlemen doing so can expect my personal thanks and commendation in their personnel files."

That impressed them, I could see. The favorable notice of one's superiors is invariably one's ticket to the better sort of assignment. Clearing my throat, I continued:

"I anticipate arriving at no later than half-past-two to oversee the final stages of removal. Kindly remain at your transports until I transmit your signal to depart for the central collection point. Have you any further questions, ladies and gentlemen?"

"None, sir," Averill said, and the others nodded agreement.

"Then it's settled," I told them, and carefully folded shut the mapbook. "A word of warning to you all: you may become aware of precursors to the shock in the course of the evening. History will record a particularly nasty seismic disturbance at two A.M. in particular, and another at five. Control your natural panic, please. Upsetting as you may find these incidents, they will present no danger whatsoever, will in fact go unnoticed by such mortals as happen to be awake at that hour."

Averill put up his hand. "I read the horses will be able to feel it," he said, a little nervously. "I read they'll go mad."

I shrugged. "Undoubtedly why we have been obliged to confine ourselves to motor transport. Of course, *we* are no brute beasts. I have every confidence that we will all resist any irrational impulses toward flight before the job is finished.

"Now then! You may attend to the removal of your personal effects and prepare for the evening's festivities. I shouldn't lunch tomorrow; you'll want to save your appetites for the banquet at Cliff House. I understand it's going to be rather a Roman experience!"

The tension broken, they laughed; and if Averill laughed a bit too loudly, it must be remembered that he was still young. As immortals go, that is.

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Astute mortals might have detected something slightly out of the ordinary on that Tuesday, the 17th of April; certainly the hired-van drivers must have noticed an increase in business, as they were dispatched to house after house in every district of the city to pick up nearly identical loads, these being two or three ordinary-looking trunks and one crate precisely fifty centimeters long, twenty centimeters wide and twenty centimeters high, in which a credenza might fit snugly. And it would be extraordinary if none of them remarked upon the fact that all these same consignments were directed to the same location on the waterfront, the berth of the steamer *Mayfair*.

Certainly in some cases mortal landladies noticed trunks being taken down flights of stairs, and put anxious questions to certain of their tenants regarding hasty removal; but their fears were laid to rest by smiling lies and ready cash.

And did anyone notice, as twilight fell, when persons in immaculate evening dress were suddenly to be seen in nearly every street? Doubtful; for it was, after all, the second night of the opera season, and with the Metropolitan company in town all of Society had turned out to do them honor. If a certain number of them converged on a certain warehouse in an obscure district, and departed therefrom shortly afterward in gleaming automobiles, that was unlikely to excite much interest in observers either.

I myself guided a brisk little four-cylinder Franklin through the streets, bracing myself as it bumped over the cable car tracks, and steered down Gough with the intention of turning at Fulton and following it out to the beach. At the corner of Geary I glimpsed for a moment a tall figure in a red coat, and wondered what it was doing so far from the theater district; but a glance over my shoulder made it plain that I was mistaken. The red-clad figure shambling along was no more than a bum, albeit one of considerable stature. I dismissed him easily from my thoughts as I contemplated the O'Neil family's outing to the theater.

Had I a warm, sentimental sensation thinking of them, remembering Ella's face aglow when she saw me present her father with the tickets? Certainly not. One magical evening out was scarcely going to make up for their ghastly deaths, in whatever cosmic scale might be supposed to balance such things. Best not to dwell on *that* aspect of it at all. No, it was the convenience of their absence from home that occupied my musings, and the best way to take advantage of it with regard to my mission.

At the end of Fulton I turned right, in the purple glow of evening over the vast Pacific. Far out to sea—well beyond the sight of mortal eyes—the Company transport ships lay at anchor, waiting only for the cover of full darkness to approach the shore. In a few hours I'd be on board one of them, steaming off in the direction of the Farallones to catch my air transport, with no thought for the smoking ruin of the place I'd lived in so many harrowing weeks.

Cliff House loomed above me, its turreted mass a blaze of light. I saw with some irritation that the long uphill approach was crowded with carriages and automobiles, drawn in on a diagonal; I was obliged to go up as far as the rail depot before I could find a place to leave my motor, and walk back downhill past the Baths.

I dare say the waiters at Cliff House could not recall an evening when so large a party, of such unusual persons, had dined with such hysterical gaiety as on this 17th of April, 1906.

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If I recall correctly, the reservation had been made in the name of an international convention of seismologists. San Francisco was ever the most cosmopolitan of cities, so the restaurant staff expressed no surprise when elegantly attired persons of every known color began arriving in carriages and automobiles. If anyone remarked upon a certain indefinable similarity in appearance amongst the conventioneers that transcended race, why, that might be explained by their common avocation—whatever seismology might be; no one on the staff had any clear idea. Only the queer nervousness of the guests was impossible to account for, the tendency toward uneasy giggling, the sudden frozen silences and dilated pupils.

I think I can speak for my fellow operatives when I say that we were determined to enjoy ourselves, terror notwithstanding. We deserved the treat, every one of us; we faced a long night of hard work, the culmination of months of labor, under circumstances of mental strain that would test the resolution of the most hardened mercenaries. The least we were owed was an evening of silk hats and tiaras.

There was a positive chatter of communication on the ether as I approached. We were all here, or in the act of arriving; not since leaving school had I been in such a crowd of my own kind. I thought how we were to feast here, a company of immortals in an airy castle perched on the edge of the Uttermost West, and flit away well before sunrise. It is occasionally pleasant to embody a myth.

I saw Mme. D'Araignee stepping down from a carriage, evidently arriving with other members of the Hopkins operation team. No bulky Russian sea captain in sight, of course, yet; I hastened to her side and tipped my hat.

"Madame, will you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you within?"

"*M'sieur* Victor." She gave me a dazzling smile. She wore a gown of pale bluegreen silk, a shade much in fashion that season, which brought out beautifully certain copper hues in her intensely black skin. Diamonds winked from the breathing shadow of her bosom. She took my arm and we proceeded inside, where we had the remarkable experience of having to shout our transmissions to one another, so crowded was the ether:

I am very *pleased to inform you I have arranged for an automobile for your use this evening,* I told her, as we paused at the cloakroom for checks.

Oh, I am so glad! I do hope you weren't put to unnecessary trouble.

Through the door to the dining room we caught glimpses of napery like snow, folded in a wilderness of sharp little peaks, with here and there a gilt epergne rising above them.

Not what I'd call unnecessary trouble, no, though it proved impossible to requisition anything at this late date. However, I did have a vehicle allocated for my own personal use and that fine runabout is entirely at your disposal.

Merci, merci mille temps*! But will this not impede your own mission?*

Not at all, dear lady. I shall be obliged to you for transportation as far as the Palace, I think, after we've dined; but since my mission involves nothing more strenuous than carrying off a child, I anticipate strolling back across the city with ease.

You are too kind, my friend.

A gentleman could do no less. I pulled out a chair for her.

We chatted pleasantly of trifling matters as the rest of the guests arrived. We studied the porcelain menu in some astonishment—the Company had

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spent a fortune here tonight, certainly enough to have allotted me one extra automobile. I was rather nettled, but my irritation was mollified somewhat by the anticipation of our *carte du jour:*

Green Turtle Soup Consommé Divinesse
Salmon in Sauce Veloute Trout Almondine Crab Cocktail
Braised Sweetbreads Roast Quail Andaluz
Le Faux Mousse Faison Lucullus
Early Green Peas White Asparagus Risotto Milanese
Roast Saddle of Venison with Port Wine Jelly
Curried Tomatoes Watercress Salad
Chicken Marengo Plovers' Eggs Virginia Ham Croquettes
Lobster Salad Oysters in Variety
Gateau d'Or et Argent Assorted Fruits in Season
Rose Snow Tulip Jellies Water Ices
Surprise Yerba Buena

All accompanied. of course, by the appropriate vintages, and service *à la russe.* We *were* being rewarded.

A shift in the black rock, miles down, needle-thin fissures screaming through stone, perdurable clay bulging like the head of a monstrous child engaging for birth, straining, straining, STRAINING!

The smiling chatter stopped dead. The waiters looked around, confused, at that elegant assembly frozen like mannequins. Not a scrape of chair moving, not a chime of crystal against china. Only the sound that we alone listened to: the cello-string far below us, tuning for the dance of the wrath of God. I found myself staring across the room directly into Lewis's eyes, where he had halted at the doorway in mid-step. The immortal lady on his arm was as still as a painted image, a perfect profile by Da Vinci.

The orchestra conductor mistook our silence for a cue of some kind. He turned hurriedly to his musicians and they struck up a little waltz tune, light gracious accompaniment to our festivities. With a boom and a rush of vacuum the service doors parted, as the first of the waiters burst through with tureens and silver buckets of ice. Champagne corks popped like artillery. As the noises roared into our silence, an immortal in white lace and spangles shrieked; she turned it into a high trilling laugh, placing her slender hand upon her throat.

So conversation resumed, and a server appeared at my elbow with a napkined bottle. I held up my glass for champagne. Mme. D'Araignee and I clinked an unspoken toast and drank fervently.

Twice more while we dined on those good things, the awful warning came. As the venison roast was served forth, its dish of port jelly began to shimmer and vibrate—too subtly for the mortal waiters to notice more than a pretty play of light, but *we* saw. On the second occasion the oysters had just come to table, and what subaudible pandemonium of clattering there was: half-shell against half-shell with the sound of basalt cliffs grinding together, and the staccato rattle of all the little sauceboats with their scarlet and yellow and pink and green contents; though of course the mortal waiters couldn't hear it. Not even the patient horses waiting in their carriage-traces heard it yet. But the sparkling bubbles ascended more swiftly through the glasses of champagne.

The waiters began to move along the tables bearing trays: little cut-crys-

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tal goblets of pink ices, or red and amber jellies, or fresh strawberries drenched in liqueur, or cakes. We heard the ringing note of a dessert spoon against a wineglass, signaling us all to attention.

The Chief Project Facilitator rose to address us. Labienus stood poised and smiling in faultless white tie and tuxedo. As he waited for the babble of voices to fade he took out his gold Chronometer on its chain, studied its tiny screen, then snapped its case shut and returned it to the pocket of his white silk waistcoat.

"My fellow Seismologists." His voice was quiet, yet without raising it he reached all corners of the room. Commanding legions confers a certain ease in public speaking. "Ladies." He bowed. "I trust you've enjoyed the bill of fare. I know that, as I dined, I was reminded of the fact that perhaps in no other city in the world could such a feast be so gathered, so prepared, so served to such a remarkable gathering. Where but here by the Golden Gate can one banquet in a splendor that beggars the Old World, on delicacies presented by masters of culinary sophistication hired from all civilized nations—all the while in sight of forested hills where savages roamed *within living memory*, across a bay that *within living memory* was innocent of any sail?

"So swiftly has she risen, this great city, as though magically conjured by djinni out of thin air. Justifiably her citizens might expect to wake tomorrow in a wilderness, and find that this gorgeous citadel had been as insubstantial as their dreams."

Archly exchanged glances between some of our operatives as his irony was appreciated.

"But if that *were* to come to pass—if they *were* to wake alone, unhoused and shivering upon a stony promontory, facing into a cold northern ocean and a hostile gale—why, you know as well as I do that within a few short years the citizens of San Francisco would create their city anew, with spires soaring ever closer to Heaven, and mansions yet more gracious."

Of course we knew it, but the poor mortal waiters didn't. I am afraid some of our younger operatives were base enough to smirk.

"Let us marvel, ladies and gentlemen, at this phoenix of a city, at once ephemeral and abiding. Let us drink to the imperishable spirit of her citizens. I give you the City of San Francisco."

"The City of San Francisco," we chorused, raising our glasses high.

"And I *give* you," smiling he extended his hand, "The City of San Francisco!"

Beaming the waiters wheeled it in, on a vast silver cart: an ornate confection of pastry, of spun-sugar and marzipan and candies, a perfect model of the City. It was possible to discern a tiny Ferry Building rising above chocolate wharves, and a tiny Palace, and Nob Hill reproduced in sugared peel and nonpareils. Across the familiar grid of streets Golden Gate Park was done in green fondant, and beyond it was the hill where Sutro Park rose in nougat and candied violets, and beyond that Cliff House itself, in astonishing detail.

We applauded.

Then she was destroyed, that beautiful city, with a silver cake knife and serving wedge, and parceled out to us in neat slices. One had to commend Labienus' sense of humor, to say nothing of his sense of ritual.

It was expected that we would wish to dance, after dining; the ballroom

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had been reserved for our use, and at some point during dessert the orchestra had discreetly risen and carried their instruments away to the dais.

I thought the idea of dancing in rather poor taste, under the circumstances, and apparently many of my fellow operatives agreed with me; but Averill and some of the other young ones got out on the floor eagerly enough, and soon the stately polonaise gave way to ragtime tunes and two-stepping.

Under the pretense of going for a smoke I stepped out on the terrace, to breathe the clean night air and metabolize my portion of magnificent excess in peace. By ones and twos several of the older immortals followed me; soon there was quite an assemblage of us out there between two worlds, between the dark water surging around Seal Rock and the brilliant magic lantern of the ballroom.

"Victor?" Mme. D'Araignee was making her way to me through the crowd. Her slippers, together with her diamonds, had gone into the leather case she was carrying, and she had donned sensible walking shoes; she had buttoned a long motorist's duster over her evening gown. The radiant Queen of the Night stood now before me as the Efficient Modern Woman.

"You didn't care to dance either, I see," she remarked.

"Not I, no," I replied. We stood for a moment looking in at the giddy whirl. I saw Averill prance by in the arms of an immortal sylph in pink satin; their faces were flushed and merry. Don't think them heartless, Reader. They did not understand yet. Horror, for Averill, was still a lonely prairie and a burning wagon; for the girl, still a soldier with a bayonet in a deserted orchard. *Those* nightmares weren't here in this bright room with its bouncing music, and so all must be right with the world.

But we were old ones, Mme. D'Araignee and I, and we stood outside in the dark and watched them dance.

Down, miles down, the slick water on the clay face and the widening fissure in darkness, dead shale trembling like an exhausted limb, granite crumbling, rock cracking with the strain and crying out in a voice that rose up, and up at last through the red brick, through the tile and parquet, into the warm air and the music!

The mortal musicians played on, but the dancers faltered. Some of them stopped, looking around in confusion; some of them only missed a step or two and then plunged back into the dance with greater abandon, determined to celebrate something.

Mme. D'Araignee shivered. I threw my unlit cigar over the parapet into the sea.

"Shall we go, Nan?" I offered her my arm. She took it readily and we left Cliff House.

Outside on the carriage drive, and all the way up the steep hill to where my motor was parked, the waiting horses were tossing their heads and whickering uneasily.

Mme. D'Araignee took the wheel, easily guiding us back down into the City through the spangled night.

Even now, at the Grand Opera House, Enrico Caruso was striking a pose before a vast Spanish mountain range rendered on canvas and raising his carbine to threaten poor Bessie Abott. Even now, at the Mechanic's Pavilion, the Grand Prize Masked Carnival was in full swing, with throngs of costumed roller-skaters whirling around the rink that would be a triage hospital in twelve hours and a pile of smoking ashes in twenty-four. Even now, the clock on the face of Old St. Mary's Church—bearing its warning

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legend SON OBSERVE THE TIME AND FLY FROM EVIL—was counting out the minutes left for heedless passers-by. Even now, the O'Neil children were sitting forward in their seats, scarcely able to breathe as the cruel Toymaker recited the incantation that would bring his creations to life.

And we rounded the corner at Divisadero and sped down Market, with Prospero's *aprés*-pageant speech ringing in our ears. At the corner of Third I pointed and Mme. D'Araignee worked the clutch, steered over to the curb and trod on the brake pedal.

"You're quite sure you won't need a ride back?" she inquired over the chatter of the cylinders. I put my legs out and leapt down to the pavement.

"Perfectly sure, Nan." I shot my cuffs and adjusted the drape of my coat. Reaching into the seat I took my stick and silk hat. "Give my seat to the Muse of Painting. I'm off to lurk in shadows like a gentleman."

"*Bonne chance,* then, Victor." She eased up on the brake, clutched, and cranked the wheel over so the Franklin swung around in a wide arc to retrace its course up Market Street. I tipped my hat and bowed; with a cheery wave and a double honk on the Franklin's horn, she steered away into the night.

So far, so good. The night was yet young and there were plenty of debonair socialites in evening dress on the street, arriving and departing from the restaurants, the hotels, the theaters. For a block I was one of their number; then I accomplished my disappearance down a black alleyway into another world, to thread my way through the boarding-house warren.

Rats were out and scuttling everywhere, sensing the coming disaster infallibly. In some buildings they were cascading down the stairs like trickling water. Cats ignored them and drunkards stood watching in stupefied amazement, but there was nobody else to remark upon it; these streets did not invite promenaders.

I found the O'Neils' building and made my way up through the unlit stairwell, here and there kicking vermin out of my way. I left the landing and proceeded down their corridor, past doors tight shut showing only feeble lines of light at floor level to mark where the occupants were at home. I heard snores; I heard weeping; I heard a drunken quarrel; I heard a voice raised in wistful melody.

No light at the O'Neils' door, naturally; none at the door immediately opposite theirs. I scanned the room beyond but could discern no occupant. Drawing out a skeleton key from my waistcoat pocket, I gained entrance and shut the door after me.

No tenant at all; good. It was death-cold in there and black as pitch, for a roller shade had been drawn down on the one window. A slight tug sent it wobbling upward but failed to let much more light into the room. Not that I needed light to see my Chronometer as I checked it; half-past eleven, and even now my teams were assembling at their stations on Nob Hill. I leaned against a wall, folded my arms and composed myself to wait.

Time passed slowly for me, but in Toyland it sped by. Songs and dances, glittering processions came to their inevitable close; fairies took wing. Innocence was rewarded and wickedness resoundingly punished. The last of the ingenious special effects guttered out, the curtain descended, the orchestra fell silent, the house lights came up. A little while the magic lingered, as the O'Neil family made their way out through the lobby, a little while it hung around them like a perfume in the atmosphere of red velvet and gilt and fashionably attired strangers, until they were borne out through the doors

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by the receding tide of the crowd. Then the magic left them, evaporating upward into the night and the fog, and they got their bearings and made their way home along the dark streets.

I heard them, coming heavily up the stairs, O'Neil and Mary each carrying a child. Down the corridor their footsteps came, and stopped outside.

"Slide down now, Ella, Daddy's got to open the door."

I heard the sound of a key fumbling in darkness for its lock, and a drowsy little voice singing about Toyland, the paradise of childhood to which you can never return.

"Hush, Ella, you'll wake the neighbors."

"Donal's asleep. He missed the ending." Ella's voice was sad. "And it was such a beautiful, beautiful ending. Don't you think it was a beautiful ending, Daddy?"

"Sure it was, darling." Their voices receded a bit as they crossed the threshold. I heard a clink and the sputtering hiss of a match; there was the faintest glimmer of illumination down by the floor.

"Sssh, sh, sh. Home again. Help Mummy get his boots off, Ella, there's a dear."

"I'll just step across to Mrs. Varian's and collect the baby."

"Mind you remember his blanket."

"I will that."

Footsteps in the corridor again, discreet rapping on a panel, a whispered conversation in darkness and a sleepy wail; then returning footsteps and a pair of doors closing. Then, more muffled but still distinct to me, the sound of the O'Neils going to bed.

Their lamps were blown out. Their whispers ceased. Still I waited, listening as the minutes ticked away for their mortal souls to rest.

Half-past one on the morning of Wednesday, the 18th of April in the year 1906, in the City of San Francisco. Francis O'Neil and his wife and their children asleep finally and forever, and the world had finished with them. In the grey morning, at precisely fourteen minutes after the hour of five, this boarding-house would lurch forward into the street, bricks tumbling as mortar blew out like talcum powder, rotten timbers snapping, and that would be the end of Frank's strength and Mary's care and Ella's dreams, the end of the brief unhappy baby, and no-one would remember them but me.

And, perhaps, Donal. I stepped across the hall and let myself into their room, perfectly silent.

The children lay in their trundle on the floor, next to their parents' bed. Donal slept on the outer edge, curled on his side, both hands tucked under his chin. I stood for a moment observing, analyzing their alpha patterns. When I was satisfied that no casual noise would awaken them, I bent and lifted Donal from his bed. He sighed but slept on. After a moment's hesitation I drew the blanket up around Ella's shoulders.

I stood back. The boy wore a nightshirt and long black stockings, but the night was cold. Frank's coat hung over the back of a chair: I appropriated it to wrap his son. Shifting Donal to one arm, I backed out of the room and shut the door.

Finished.

No sleeper in that building woke to hear our rapid descent of the stairs. On the first landing a drunk sat upright, leaning his head on the railings, sound asleep with his lower jaw dropped open like a corpse's. We fled lightly past him, Donal and I, and he never moved.

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Away through the maze, then, away forever from the dirt and stench and poverty of that place. In twelve hours it would have ceased to exist, and the wind would scatter white ashes so the dead could never be named nor numbered.

Even Market Street was dark now, its theaters shut down. Over at the Grand Opera House on Mission, Enrico Caruso's costumes hung neatly in his dark dressing-room, ready for a performance of *La Boheme* that would never take place. Up at the Mechanic's Pavilion, the weary janitor surveyed the confetti and other festive debris littering the skating rink and decided to sweep it up in the morning. Toyland, at the Columbia, was shut away in its properties-room; fairy tinsel, butterfly wings, bear heads peering down from dusty shelves into the darkness.

Even now my resolute gentlemen and ladies were despoiling Nob Hill, flitting through its darkened drawing rooms at hyperspeed like so many whirring ghosts, bearing with them winking gilt and crystal, calfskin and morocco, canvas and brass, all the very best that money could buy but couldn't hope to preserve against the hour to come. Without the Franklin I'd have a tedious walk uphill to join them, but at a brisk pace I might arrive with time to spare.

Donal stretched and muttered in his sleep. I shifted him to my other shoulder, changed hands on my walking-stick, and was about to hurry on when I caught a whiff of some familiar scent on the air. I halted.

It was not a pleasant scent. It was harsh, musky, like blood or sweat but neither; like an animal smell, but other; it summoned in me a sudden terror and confusion. When I tried to identify it, however, I had only a mental image of a bear costume hanging on a hook, the head looking down from a shelf. When had I seen *that? I* hadn't seen that! *Whose memories were these?*

I controlled myself with an effort. Some psychic disturbance was responsible for this, my own nerves were contributing to this, there was no real danger. Why, of course: it must be nearly Two o'clock, when the first of the major subsonic disruptions would occur.

Yes, here it came now. I could hear nearby horses begin to scream and stamp frantically, I could feel the paving-bricks grind against one another under the soles of my boots, and the air groaned as though buried giants were praying to God for release.

Yes, I thought, this must be it. I balanced my stick against my knee and drew out my chronometer, trying to verify the time. As I peered at it the door of a stable directly across the street burst open, and a white mare came charging out, hooves thundering. Donal jerked and cried.

Timing is everything. My assailant chose that perfect moment of distraction to strike. I was enveloped in a choking wave of *that smell* as a hand closed on my face and pulled my head back. Instantly I clawed at it, twisted my head to bite; but a vast arm was wrapping around me from the other side and cold steel entered my throat, opened the artery, wrenched as it was pulled out again.

So swiftly had this occurred that my stick was still falling through midair, had not yet struck the pavement. Donal was pulled upward and backward, torn from me, and I heard his terrified cry mingle with the clatter of the stick as it landed, the rumbling earth, the running horse, a howling laughter I knew but could not place. I was sinking to my knees, clutching at my cut throat as my blood fountained out over the starched front of my dress shirt and stained the diamond stud so it winked like Mars. Ares,

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God of War. *Thor*. I was conscious of a terrible anger as I descended to the shadows and curled into Fugue.

"Will you get on to this, now? Throat cut and he's not been robbed! Here's his watch, for Christ's sake!"

"Stroke of luck for us, anyhow."

I sat up and glared at them. The two mortal thieves backed away from me, horrified; then one mustered enough nerve to dart in again, aiming a kick at me while he made a grab for my chronometer. I caught his wrist and broke it. He jumped back, stifling an agonized yell; his companion took to his heels and after only a second's hesitation he followed.

I remained where I was, huddled on the pavement, running a self-diagnostic. The edges of my windpipe and jugular artery had closed and were healing nicely at hyperspeed; if the thieves hadn't roused me from Fugue I'd be whole now. Blood production had sped up to replace that now dyeing the front of my previously immaculate shirt. The exterior skin of my throat was even now self-suturing, but I was still too weak to rise.

My hat and stick remained where they had fallen, but of Donal or my assailant there was no sign. I licked my dry lips. There was a vile taste in my mouth. My chronometer told me it was a quarter past two. I dragged myself to the base of a wall and leaned there, half-swooning, drowning in unwelcome remembrance.

That Smell. Sweat, blood, the Animal, and smoke. Yes, they'd called it the Summer of Smoke, that year the world ended. What world had that been? The world where I was a little prince, or nearly so; better if my mother hadn't been a Danish slave, but my father had no sons by his lady wife, and so I had fine clothes and a gold pin for my cloak.

When I went to climb on the beached longship and play with the gear, a warrior threatened me with his fist; then another man told him he'd better not, for I was Baldulf's brat. *That* made him back down in a hurry. And once, my father set me on the table and put his gold cup in my hand, but I nearly dropped it, it was so heavy. He held it for me and I tasted the mead and his companions laughed, beating on the table. The ash-white lady, though, looked down at the floor and wrung her hands.

She told me sometimes that if I wasn't good the Bear would come for me. She was the only one who would ever dare to talk to me that way. And then he *had* come, the Bear and his slaughtering knights. All in one day I saw our tent burned and my father's head staring from a pike. Screaming, smoke and fire, and a banner bearing a red dragon that snaked like a living flame, I remember.

My mother had caught me up and was running for the forest, but she was a plump girl and could not get up the speed. Two knights chased after us on horseback, whooping like madmen. Just under the shadow of the oaks, they caught us. My mother fell and rolled, loosing her hold on me, and screamed for me to run; then one of the knights was off his horse and on her. The other knight got down too and stood watching them, laughing merrily. One of her slippers had come off and her bare toes kicked at the air until she died.

I had been sobbing threats, I had been hurling stones and handfuls of oak-mast at the knights, and now I ran at the one on my mother and attacked him with my teeth and nails. He reared up on his elbows to shake me off; but the other knight reached down and plucked me up as easily as if

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I'd been a kitten. He held me at his eye level while I shrieked and spat at him. His shrill laughter dropped to a chuckle, but never stopped.

A *big* shaven face, no beard, no mustache, colorless fair hair cropped. Head of a strange helm-shape, tremendous projecting nose and brows, and his wide gleeful eyes so pale a blue as to be colorless, like one of my father's hounds. He had enormous broad cheekbones and strange teeth. That smell, that almost-animal smell, was coming from him. *That* had been where I'd first encountered it, hanging there in the grip of that knight.

The other knight had got up and came forward with his knife drawn and ready for me, but my captor held out his huge gauntleted hand.

"*Siste!*" he told him pleasantly. "*Siste, comes.*"

The other knight growled something and brandished his knife. My captor's eyes sparkled; he batted playfully at my assailant, who flew backward into a tree and lay there twitching, blood running from his ears. Left in peace, my knight held me up and sniffed at me. He sat down and ran his hands all over me, taking his gauntlets off to squeeze my skull until I feared it would break like an egg. I had stopped fighting, but I whimpered and tried to wriggle away.

"Do you want to live, little boy?" he asked me in perfectly accented Saxon. He had a high-pitched voice, nasally resonant.

"Yes," I replied, shocked motionless.

"Then be good and do not try to run away from me. I will preserve you from death. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good." He forced my mouth open and examined my teeth. Apparently satisfied, he got up, thrusting me under one arm. Taking the two horses' bridles, he walked back to the war-camp of the Bear with long rolling strides.

It was growing dark, and new fires had been lit. We passed pickets who challenged my captor, and he answered them with smiles and bantering remarks. At last he stopped before a tent and gave a barking order, whereupon a groom hurried out to take the horses and led them away for him. Two other knights sat nearby, leaning back wearily as their squires took off their armor for them. One pointed at me and asked a question.

My captor grinned and said something in fluting reply, hugging me to his chest. One knight smiled a little, but the other scowled and spat into the fire. As my captor bore me into his tent I heard someone mutter "*Romani!*" in a disgusted tone.

It was dark in the tent, and there was no-one there to see as he stripped off my clothes and continued his examinations. I attempted to fight again but he held me still and asked, very quietly, "Are you a stupid child? Have you forgot what I said?"

"No." I was so frightened and furious I was trembling, and I hated the smell of him, so close in there.

"Then listen to me again, Saxon child. I will not hurt you, neither will I outrage you. But if you want to die, keep struggling."

I held still then and stood silent, hating him. He seemed quite unconcerned about that; he gave me a cup of wine and a hard cake, and ignored me while I ate and drank. All his attention was on the two knights outside. When he heard them depart into their respective tents, he wrapped me in a cloak and bore me out into the night again.

At the other end of the camp there was a very fine tent, pitched a little distance from the others. Two men stood before it, deep in conversation. Af-

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ter a moment one went away. The other remained outside the tent a moment, breathing the night air, looking up at the stars. When he lifted the flap and made to go inside, my captor stepped forward.

"*Salve,* Emres."

"*Salve,* Budu," replied the other. He was a tall man and elderly—I thought: his hair and eyebrows were white. His face, however, was smooth and unlined, and there was an easy suppleness to his movements. He was very well-dressed, as Britons went. They had a brief conversation and then the one called Emres raised the flap of the tent again, gesturing us inside.

It was so brilliantly lit in there it dazzled my eyes. I was again unrobed, in that white glare, but I dared do no more than clench my fists as the old one examined me. His hands were remarkably soft and clean, and *he* did not smell bad. He stuck me with a pin and dabbed the blood onto the tongue of a little god he had, sitting on a chest; it clicked for a moment and then chattered to him in a tinny voice. My captor and he had a conversation in a swift tongue quite unlike the Latin they'd been using until that time. At its conclusion, Emres pointed at me and asked a question. My captor shrugged. He turned his big head to look at me.

"What is your name, little boy?" he asked in Saxon.

"Bricta, son of Baldulf," I told him. He looked back at Emres.

"*Ecce Victor,*" he said.

The taste in my mouth was unbearable. I hadn't wanted this recollection, this squalid history! I much preferred Time to begin with that first memory of the silver ship that rose skyward from the circle of stones, taking me away to the gleaming hospital and the sweet-faced nurses.

I got unsteadily to my feet, groping after my hat and stick. As I did so I heard the unmistakable sound of an automobile approaching. In another second a light runabout rattled around the corner and pulled up before me. Labienus sat behind the wheel, no longer the jovial Master of Ceremonies. He was all hard-eyed centurion now.

"We received your distress signal. Report, please, Victor."

"I was attacked," I said dully.

"Tsk! Rather obviously."

"I . . . I know it sounds improbable, sir, but I believe my assailant was another operative," I explained. To my surprise he merely nodded.

"We know his identity. You'll notice he's sending quite a distinct signal."

"Yes." I looked down the street in wonderment. The signal lay on the air like a trail of green smoke. Why would he signal? "He's . . . he's somewhere in Chinatown."

"Exactly," agreed Labienus. "Well, Victor, what do you intend to do about this?"

"Sir?" I looked back at him, confused. Something was wrong here, some business I hadn't been briefed about, perhaps? But why—?

"Come, come, man, you've a mission to complete! He took the mortal boy! Surely you've formed a plan to rescue him?" he prompted.

The hideous taste welled in my mouth. I suppressed an urge to expectorate.

"My team on Nob Hill is more than competent to complete the salvage there without my supervision," I said, attempting to sound coolly rational. "That being the case, I believe, sir, that I shall seek out the scoundrel who did this to me and jolly well *kill* him. Figuratively speaking, of course."

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"Very good. And?"

"And, of course, recapture my mortal recruit and deliver him to the Collection Point as planned and according to schedule," I said. "Sir."

"See that you do." Labienus worked both clutch and brake expertly and edged his motor forward, cylinders idling. "Report to my cabin on the *Thunderer* at seven hundred hours for a private debriefing. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly clear, sir." So there *was* some mystery to be explained. Very well.

"You are dismissed."

"Sir." I doffed my hat and watched as he drove smoothly away up Market Street.

I replaced my hat and turned in the direction of the signal, probing. My dizziness was fading, burned away by my growing sense of outrage. The filthy old devil, how dare he do this to me? What was he playing at? I began to walk briskly again, my speed increasing with my strength.

Of course, the vow to kill him hadn't been meant literally. We do not die. But I'd find some way of paying him out in full measure, I hadn't the slightest doubt about that. He had the edge on me in strength, but I was swifter and in full possession of my faculties, whereas *he* was probably drooling mad, the old troll.

Yes, mad, that was the only explanation. There had always been rumors that some of the oldest operatives were flawed somehow, those created earliest, before the Augmentation Process had been perfected. Budu had been one of the oldest I'd ever met. He had been created more than forty thousand years ago, before the human races had produced their present assortment of representatives.

Now that I thought of it, I hadn't seen an operative of his racial type *in the field* in years. They held desk jobs at Company bases, or were Air Transport pilots. I'd assumed this was simply because the modern mortal race was now too different for Budu's type to pass unnoticed. What if the true reason was that the Company had decided not to take chances with the earlier models? What if there was some risk that all of that particular class were inherently unstable?

Good God! No wonder I was expected to handle this matter without assistance. Undoubtedly our masters wanted the whole affair resolved as quietly as possible. They could count on my discretion; I only hoped my ability met their expectations.

Following the signal, I turned left at the corner of Market and Grant. The green trail led straight up Grant as far as Sacramento. What was his game? He was drawing me straight into the depths of the Celestial quarter, a place where I'd be conspicuous were it daylight, but at no particular disadvantage otherwise.

He must intend some kind of dialogue with me. The fact that he had taken a hostage indicated that he wanted our meeting on his terms, under his control. That he felt he needed a hostage could be taken as a sign of weakness on his part. Had his strength begun to fail somehow? Not if his attack on me had been any indication. Though it had been largely a matter of speed and leverage. . . .

I came to the corner of Grant and Sacramento. The signal turned to the left again. It traveled up a block, where it could be observed emanating from a darkened doorway. I stood considering it for a moment, tapping my stick impatiently against my boot. I spat into the gutter, but it did not take the taste from my mouth.

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I walked slowly uphill past the shops that sold black and scarlet lacquerware and green jade. Here was the Baptist mission, smelling of starch and good intentions. From this lodging-house doorway a heavy perfume of joss sticks; from this doorway a reek of preserved fish. And from *this* doorway . . .

It stood ajar. A narrow corridor went straight back into darkness, with a narrower stair ascending to the left. The bottommost stair tread had been thrown open like the lid of a piano bench, revealing a black void below.

I scanned. *He* was down there, and making no attempt to hide himself. Donal was there with him, still alive. There were no other signs of mortal life, however.

I paced forward into the darkness and stood looking down. Chill air was coming up from below. It stank like a crypt. Rungs leading down into a passageway were just visible, by a wavering pool of green light. So was a staring dead face, contorted into a grimace of rage.

After a moment's consideration, I removed my hat and set it on the second step. My stick I resolved to take with me, although its sword would be useless against my opponent. No point in any further delay; it was time to descend into yet another hell.

At the bottom of the ladder the light was a little stronger. It revealed more bodies lying in a subterranean passage of brick plastered over and painted a dull green. The dead had been young men, and seemed to have died fighting, within the last few hours. They were smashed like so many insects. The light that made this plain was emanating from a wide doorway that opened off the passage, some ten feet further on. The smell of death was strongest in there.

"Come in, Victor," said a voice.

I went as far as the doorway and looked.

In that low-ceilinged chamber of bare plaster, in the fitful glow of one oil lamp, more dead men were scattered. These were all elderly Chinese, skeletally emaciated, and they had been dead some hours and they had not died quietly. One leaned in a chair beside the little table with the flickering lamp; one was hung up on a hook that protruded from a wall; one lay half-in, half-out of a cupboard passage, his arm flung out as though beckoning. Three were sprawled on the floor beside slatwood bunks, in postures suggesting they had been slain whilst in the lethargy of their drug and tossed from the couches like rags. The apparatus of the opium-den lay here and there; a gold-wrapped brick of the poisonous substance, broken pipes, burnt dishes, long matches, bits of wire.

And there, beyond them, sat the monster of my long nightmares.

"You don't like my horrible parlor," chuckled Budu. "Your little white nose has squeezed nearly shut, your nostrils look like a fish's gills."

"It's just the sort of nest you'd make for yourself, you murdering old fool," I told him. He frowned at me.

"I have never murdered," he told me seriously. "But these were murderers, and thieves. Who else would keep such a fine secret cellar, eh? A good place for a private meeting!" He leaned back against the wall, lounging at his ease across the top tier of a bunk, waving enormous mud-caked boots. His dress consisted of stained bluejean trousers, a vast shapeless red coat made from a blanket, and a battered black felt hat. He had let his hair and beard grow long; they trailed down like pale moss over his bare hairy chest. He looked rather like St. Nicholas turned monster.

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Donal sat stiffly beside him. Budu had placed his great hand about the boy's neck, as easily as I might take hold of an axe handle.

"Uncle Jimmy," moaned Donal.

"Explain yourself, sir," I addressed Budu, keeping my voice level and cold. He responded with gales of delighted laughter.

"*I* was the Briton, and *you* were the little barbarian!" he sad. "Look at us now!"

I stepped into the room, having scanned for traps. "I followed your signal," I told him. "You certainly made it plain enough. May I ask why you thought it was necessary to cut my throat?"

He shrugged, regarding me with hooded eyes. "How else to get your attention but to take your quarry from you? And how to do that but by disabling you temporarily? What harm did it do? Spoiled your nice white shirt, yes, and made you angry!" He chuckled again.

I tapped my stick in impatience. "What was your purpose in calling me here, old man?"

"To tell you a few truths, and see what you do when you've heard them. You were wondering about us, we oldest Old Ones, wondering what became of us all. You were thinking we're like badly made clockwork toys, and our Great Toymakers decided to pull us off the shelves of the toyshop." He stretched luxuriously. Donal tried to turn his head to stare at him, but was held fast as the old creature continued:

"No, no, no. We're not badly made. I was better made than *you*, little man. It's a question of purpose." He thrust his prognathous face forward at me through the gloom. "I was made a war-axe. They made you a shovel. Is the metaphor plain enough for you?"

"I take your meaning." I moved a step closer.

"You've been told all your life that our Masters wish only to save things, books and pretty pictures and children, and for this purpose *we* were made, to creep into houses like mice and steal away loot before Time can eat it."

"That's an oversimplification, but essentially true."

"Is it?" He stroked his beard in amusement. I could see the red lines across the back of his hand where I'd clawed him. He hadn't bothered to heal them yet. "You pompous creature, in your nice clothes. *You* were made to save things, Victor. *I* wasn't. Now, hear the truth: I, and all my kind, were made because our perfect and benign Masters wanted killers once. Can you guess why?"

"Well, let me see." I swallowed back bile. "You say you're not flawed. Yet it's fairly common knowledge that flawed immortals were produced, during the first experimentations with the Process. What did the Company do about them? Perhaps you were created as a means of eliminating them."

"Good guess." He nodded his head. "But wrong. They were never killed, those poor failed things. I've seen them, screaming in little steel boxes. No. Guess again."

"Then . . . perhaps at one time it was necessary to have agents whose specialty was Defense." I tried. "Prior to the dawn of civilization."

"Whee! An easy guess. You fool, of course it was! You think our Masters waited, so gentle and pure, for sweet reason to persuade men to evolve? Oh, no. Too many wolves were preying on the sheep. They needed operatives who could kill, who could happily kill fierce primitives so the peaceful ones could weave baskets and paint bison on walls." He grinned at me with those enormous teeth, and went on:

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"*We* made Civilization dawn, I and my kind! *We* pushed that bright ball over the horizon at last, and we did it by *killing!* If a man raised his hand against his neighbor, we cut it off. If a tribe painted themselves for war, we washed their faces with their own blood. Shall I tell you of the races of men you'll never see? They wouldn't learn peace, and so we were sent in to slay them, man, woman, and child!"

"You mean," I exhaled, "the Company decided to accelerate Mankind's progress by selectively weeding out its sociopathic members. And if it did? We've all heard rumors of something like that. It may be necessary from time to time even now. Not a pretty thought, but one can see the reasons. If you hadn't done it, mankind might have remained in a state of savagery forever." I took another step forward.

"We did good work," he said plaintively. "And we weren't hypocrites. It was fun." His pale gaze wandered past me to the doorway. There was a momentary flicker of something like uneasiness in his eyes, some ripple across the surface of his vast calm.

"What is the point of telling me this, may I ask?" I pressed.

"To show you that you serve lying and ungrateful Masters, child," he replied, his attention returning to me. "Stupid Masters. They've no understanding of this world they rule. Once we cleared the field so they could plant, how did they reward us? We had *been* heroes. We became looters. And you should see how they punished us, the ones who argued! No more pruning the vine, they told us, let it grow how it will. You're only to gather the fruit now, they told us. Was that fair? Was it, when we'd been created to gather heads?"

"No, I dare say it wasn't. But you adapted, didn't you?" To my dismay I was shaking with emotion. "You found ways to satisfy your urges in the Company's service. You'd taken your share of heads the day you caught me!"

"Rescued you," he corrected me. "You were only a little animal, and if I hadn't taken you away you'd have grown into a big animal like your father. There were lice crawling in his hair when I stuck his head on the pike. There was food in his beard!"

I spat in his face. I couldn't stop myself. The next second I was sick with mortification, to be provoked into such operatic behavior, and dabbed hurriedly at my chin with a handkerchief; Budu merely wiped his face with the back of his hand and smiled, content to have reduced my stature.

"Your anger changes nothing. Your father was a dirty beast. He was an oathbreaker and an invader too, as were all his people. You've been taught your history, you know all this! So don't judge me for enjoying what I did to exterminate his race. And, see, see what happened when I was ordered to stop killing Saxons! When Arthur died, Roman order died with him. All that we'd won at Badon Hill was lost and the Saxon hordes returned, never to leave. What sense did it make, to have given our aid for a while to one civilized tribe and then leave it to be destroyed?" His gaze traveled past me to the doorway again. Who was he expecting? They weren't coming to his aid, that much was clear.

"We do not involve ourselves in the petty territorial squabbles of mortals," I recited. "We do not embrace their causes. We move amongst them, saving what we can, but we are never such fools as to be drawn into their disputes."

"Yes, you're quoting Company Policy to me. But don't you see that your fine impartiality has no purpose? It accomplishes nothing! It's wasteful! You know the house will burn, so you creep in like thieves and steal the fur-

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niture beforehand, and then watch the flames. Wouldn't it be more efficient use of your time to prevent the fire in the first place?" He paused a moment and looked at the back of his hand with a slight frown. I saw the red lines there fade to pink as he set them to healing over.

"It *would* be more efficient, yes," I said, "but for one slight difficulty. You couldn't prevent the fire happening. It isn't possible to change history."

"*Recorded* history." He bared his big teeth in amusement once more. "It isn't possible to change *recorded* history. And do you think even that sacred rule's as unbreakable as you've been told? I have *made* the history that was written and read. It disappoints me. I will make something new now."

"Shall you really?" I folded my arms. Doubtless he was going to start bragging about being a god. It went with the profile of this sort of lunatic.

"Yes, and you'll help me if you're wise. Listen to me. In the time before History was written down, in those days, our Masters were bold. All mortals have inherited the legend that there was once a golden age when men lived simply in meadows, and the Earth was uncrowded and clean, and there was no war, but only arts of peace.

"But when Recorded History began—when we were forbidden to exterminate the undesirables—that paradise was lost. And our Masters let it be lost, and that is the condemnation I fling in their teeth." He drew a deep breath.

"Your point, sir?"

"I'll make an end of Recorded History. I can so decimate the races of men that their golden age will come again, and never again will there be enough of them to ravage one another or the garden they inhabit. And we immortals will be their keepers. Victor, little Victor, how long have you lived? Aren't you tired of watching them fight and starve? You creep among them like a scavenger, but you could walk among them like—"

"Like a god?" I sneered.

"I had been about to say, an angel," Budu sneered back. "I remember the service I was created for. Do you, little man? Or have you ever even known? Such luxuries you've had, among the poor mortals! Have you never felt the urge to *really* help them? But the time's soon approaching when you can."

"Ridiculous." I stated. "You know as well as I do that History won't stop. There'll be just as much warfare and mortal misery in this new century as in the centuries before, and nothing anyone can do will alter one event." I gauged the pressure of his fingers on Donal's neck. How quickly could I move to get them loose?

"Not one event? You think so? Maybe." He looked sly. "But our Masters will turn what can't be changed to their own advantage, and why can't I? Think of the great slaughters to come, Victor. How do you know I won't be working there? How do you know I haven't been at work already? How do you know I haven't got disciples among our people, weary as I am of our Masters' blundering, ready as I am to mutiny?"

"Because History states otherwise," I told him flatly. "There will be no mutiny, no War in Heaven if you like. Civilization will prevail. It is recorded that it will."

"Is it?" He grinned. "And can you tell me who recorded it? Maybe *I* did. Maybe I will, after I win. Victor, such a simple trick, but it's never occurred to you. History is only writing, and *one can write lies!*"

I stared at him. No, in fact, it never had occurred to me. He rocked to and fro in his merriment, dragging Donal with him. Silent tears streamed down the child's face.

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Budu lurched forward, fixing me with his gaze. "Listen now. I have my followers, but we need more. You'll join me because you're clever, and you're weary of this horror too, and you owe me the duty of a son, for I saved you from death. You're a Facilitator and know the codes to order Company equipment. You'll work in secret, you'll obtain certain things for me, and we'll take mortal children and work the Augmentation Process on them, and raise them as *our* own operatives, for *our* own purposes, loyal to *us*. *Then* we'll pull the weeds from the Garden. *Then* we'll geld the bull and make him pull the plough. *Then* we'll slaughter the wolf that preys on the herd. Just as we used to do! There will be Order.

"For this reason I came as a beggar to this city and followed you, watching you. Now I've made you listen to me." He looked at the doorway again. "Tell me I'm not a fool, little Victor, tell me I haven't walked into this trap with you to no purpose."

"What will you do if I refuse?" I demanded. "Break the child's neck?"

This was too much for the boy, who whimpered like a rabbit and started forward convulsively. Budu looked down, scowling as though he had forgotten about him. "Are you a stupid child?" he asked Donal. "Do you want to die?"

I cannot excuse my next act, though he drove me to it; he, and the horror of the place, and the time that was slipping away and bringing this doomed city down about our ears if we tarried. I charged him, howling like the animal he was.

He reared back; but instead of closing about Donal's throat, his fingers twitched harmlessly. As his weight shifted, his right arm dropped to his side, heavy as lead. My charge threw him backward so that his head struck the wall with a resounding thud.

All the laughter died in his eyes, and they focused inward as he ran his self-diagnostic. I caught up Donal in my arms and backed away with him, panting.

Budu looked out at me.

"A virus," he informed me. "It was in your saliva. It's producing inert matter even now, at remarkable speed, that's blocking my neuroreceptors. I don't think it will kill me, but I doubt if even your Masters could tell. I'm sure they hope so. You're surprised. You had no knowledge of this weapon inside yourself?"

"None," I said.

Budu was nodding thoughtfully, or perhaps he was beginning to be unable to hold his head up. "They didn't tell you about this talent of yours, because if you'd known about it, I would have seen it in your thoughts, and then I'd never have let you spit on me. At the very least I wouldn't have wiped it away with my wounded hand."

"A civilized man would have used a handkerchief," I could not resist observing.

He giggled, but his voice was weaker when he spoke.

"Well. I guess we'll see now if our Masters have at long last found a way to unmake their creations. Or *I* will see; you can't stay in this dangerous place to watch the outcome, I know. But you'll wish you had, in the years to come, you'll wish you knew whether or not I was still watching you, following you. For I know your defense against me now, think of that! And I know who betrayed me, with his clever virus." Budu's pale eyes widened. "I was wrong! The rest of them may be shovels, but *you,* little Victor—*you* were

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made a poisoned knife. *Victor Veneficus!"* he added, and laughed thickly at his joke. "Oh, tell him—never sleep. If I live—"

"We're going now, Donal Og, Uncle Jimmy'll get you safe out of here," I said to the child, turning from Budu to thread my way between the stinking corpses on the floor.

I heard Budu cough once as his vocal centers went, and then the ether was filled with a cascade of images: A naked child squatting on a clay floor, staring through darkness at a looming figure in a bearskin. Flames devouring brush huts, goatskin tents, cottages, halls, palaces, shops, restaurants, hotels. Soldiers in every conceivable kind of uniform, with every known weapon, in every posture of attack or defense the human form could assume.

If these were his memories, if this was the end of his life, there was no emotion of sorrow accompanying the images; no fear, no weariness, no relief either. Instead, a loud yammering laughter grew ever louder, and deafened the inner ear at the last image: a hulking brute in a bearskin, squatting beside a fire, turning and turning in his thick fingers a gleaming golden axe; and on the blade of the axe was written the word *VIRUS.*

Halfway up the ladder, the trap opening was occluded by a face that looked down at me and then drew back. I came up with all speed; I faced a small mob of Chinese, grim men with bronze hatchets. They had not expected to see a man in evening dress carrying a child.

I addressed them in Cantonese, for I could see they were natives of that province.

"The devil who killed your grandfathers is still down there. He is asleep and will not wake up. You can safely cut him to pieces now."

I took up my hat and left the mortals standing there, looking uncertainly from my departing form to the dark hole in the stair.

The air was beginning to freshen with the scent of dawn. I had little more than an hour to get across the city. In something close to panic I began to run up Sacramento, broadcasting a General Assistance Signal. Had my salvage teams waited for me? Donal clung to me and did not make a sound.

Before I had gone three blocks I heard the noise of an automobile echoing loud between the buildings. It was climbing up Sacramento toward me. I turned to meet it. Over the glare of its brass headlamps I saw Pan Wen-Shi. His tuxedo and shirtfront, unlike mine, were still as spotless as when he'd left the Company banquet. On the seat beside him was a tiny almond-eyed girl. He braked and shifted, putting out a hand to prevent her from tumbling off and rolling away downhill.

"Climb in," he shouted. I vaulted the running board and toppled into the back seat with Donal. Pan stepped on the gas and we cranked forward again.

"Much obliged to you for the ride," I said, settling myself securely and attempting to pry Donal's arms loose from my neck. "Had a bit of difficulty."

"So had I. We must tell one another our stories some day," Pan acknowledged, rounding the corner at Powell and taking us down toward Geary. The little girl had turned in her seat and was staring at us. Donal was quivering and hiding his eyes.

"Now then, Donal Og, now then," I crooned to him. "You've been a brave boy and you're all safe again. And isn't this grand fun? We're going for a ride in a real motor-car!" Under my words was a soothing frequency to blur his memory of the last two hours.

"Bad Toymaker gone?" asked the little muffled voice.

"Sure he is, Donal, and we've escaped entirely."

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He consented to lower his hands, but shrank back at the sight of the others. "Who's that?"

"Why, that's a little China doll that's escaped the old Toymaker, same as you, and that's the kind Chinaman who helped her. They're taking us to the sea, where we'll escape on a big ship."

He stared at them doubtfully. "I want Mummy," he said, tears forming in his eyes.

The little girl, who till this moment had been solemn in fascination, suddenly dimpled into a lovely smile and laughed like a silver bell. She pointed a finger at him and made a long babbling pronouncement, neither in Cantonese nor Mandarin. For emphasis, she reached down beside her and flung something at him over the back of the seat, with a triumphant cry of "*Dah*!" It was a wrapped bar of Ghirardelli's, only a little gummy at one corner where she'd been teething on it. I caught it in midair.

"See now, Donal, the nice little girl is giving us chocolates!" I tore off the wrapper hastily and gave him a piece. She reached out a demanding hand and I gave her some as well. "Chocolates and an automobile ride and a big ship! Aren't you the lucky boy, then?"

He sat quiet, watching the gregarious baby and nibbling at his treat. His memories were fading. As we rattled up Geary he looked at me with wondering eyes.

"Where Ella?" he asked me.

When I had caught my breath, I replied:

"She couldn't come to Toyland, Donal Og. But you're a lucky, lucky boy, for you will. You'll have splendid adventures and never grow old. Won't that be fun, now?"

He looked into my face, not knowing what he saw there. "Yes," he answered in a tiny voice.

Lucky boy, yes, borne away in a mechanical chariot, away from the perishable mortal world, and all the pretty nurses will smile over you and perhaps sing you to sleep before they take you off to surgery. And when you wake, you'll have been Improved; you'll be ever so much cleverer, Donal, than poor mortal monkeys like your father. A biomechanical marvel fit to stride through this new century in company with the internal combustion engine and the flying machine.

And you'll be so happy, boy, and at peace, knowing about the wonderful work you'll have to do for the Company; much happier than poor Ella would ever have been, with her wild heart, her restlessness and anger. Surely no kindness to give her eternal life, when life's stupidities and injustice could never be escaped?

. . . But you'll enjoy your immortality, Donal Og. You will, if you don't become a thing like me.

The words came into my mind unbidden, and I shuddered in my seat. Mustn't think of this just now: too much to do. Perhaps the whole incident had been some sort of hallucination? There was no foul taste in my mouth, no viral poison sizzling under my glib tongue. The experience might have been some fantastic nightmare brought on by stress, but for the blood staining my elegant evening attire.

I was a gentleman, after all. No gentleman did such things.

Pan bore left at Mason, rode the brakes all the way down to Fulton, turned right and accelerated. We sped on, desperate to leave the past.

* * *

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There were still whaleboats drawn up on the sand, still wagons waiting there, and shirtsleeved immortals hurriedly loading boxes from wagon to boat. We'd nearly left it too late: those were my people, that was my Nob Hill salvage arrayed in splendor amid the driftwood and broken shells. There were still a pair of steamers riding at anchor beyond Seal Rock, though most of the fleet had already put out to sea and could be glimpsed as tiny lights on the grey horizon, making for the Farallones. As we came within range of the Hush Field both of the children slumped into abrupt and welcome unconsciousness.

We jittered to a stop just short of the tavern, where an impatient operative from the Company's motor agency took charge of the automobile. Pan and I jumped out, caught up our respective children, and ran down the beach.

Past the wagons loaded with rich jetsam of the Gilded Age, we ran: lined up in the morning gloom and salt wind were the grand pianos, the crystal chandeliers, the paintings in gilt frames, the antique furniture. Statuary classical and modern; gold plate and tapestries. Cases of rare wines, crates of phonograph cylinders, of books and papers, waited like refugees to escape the coming morning.

I glimpsed Averill, struggling through the sand with his arms full of priceless things. He was sobbing loudly as he worked; tears coursed down his cheeks, his eyes were wide with terror, but his body served him like the clockwork toy, like the *fine machine* it was, and bore him ceaselessly back and forth between the wagon and the boat until his appointed task should be done.

"Sir! Where did you get to?" he said, gasping. "We waited and waited—and now it's gonna cut loose any second and we're still not done!"

"Couldn't be helped, old man!" I told him as we scuttled past. "Carry on! I have every faith in you!"

I shut my ears to his cry of dismay and ran on. A boat reserved for passengers still waited in the surf. Pan and I made for the boarding officer and gave our identification.

"You've cut it damned close, gentlemen," he grumbled.

"Unavoidable," I told him. His gaze fell on my gore-drenched shirt and he blinked, but waved us to our places. Seconds later we were seated securely, and the oarsmen pulled and sent us bounding out on the receding tide to the *Thunderer* where she lay at anchor.

We'd done it, we were away from that fated city where even now bronze hatchets were completing the final betrayal—

No. A gentleman does not betray others. Nor does he leave his subordinates to deal with the consequences of his misfortune.

Donal shivered in the stiff breeze, waking slowly. Frank's coat had been lost, somewhere in Chinatown; I shrugged out of my dinner jacket and put it around Donal's shoulders. He drew closer to me, but his attention was caught by the operatives working on the shore. As he watched, something disturbed the earth and the sand began to flurry and shift. Another warning was sounding up from below.

The rumbling carried to us over the roar of the sea, as did the shouts of the operatives trying to finish the loading. One wagon settled forward a few inches, causing the unfortunate precipitation of a massive antique clock into the arms of the immortals who had been gingerly easing it down. They arrested its flight, but the shock or perhaps merely the striking hour set in

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motion its parade of tiny golden automata. Out came its revolving platforms, its trumpeting angels, its pirouetting lovers, its minute Death with raised scythe and hourglass. Crazily it chimed FIVE.

Pan and I exchanged glances. He checked his chronometer. Our boatmen increased the vigor of their strokes.

Moment by moment the East was growing brighter, disclosing operatives massed on the deck of the *Thunderer*. Their faces were turned to regard the sleeping city. Pan and I were helped on deck and our mortal charges handed up after us; a pair of white-coifed nurses stepped forward.

"Agent Pan? Agent Victor?" inquired one, as the other checked a list.

"Here, now, Donal, we're on our ship at last, and here's a lovely fairy to look after you." I thrust him into her waiting arms. The other received the baby from Pan, and the little girl went without complaint; but as his nurse turned to carry him below decks, Donal twisted in her arms and reached out a desperate hand for me.

"Uncle Jimmy!" he screamed. I turned away quickly as she bore him off. Really, it was for the best.

I made my way along the rail and emerged on the aft deck, where I nearly ran into Nan D'Arraignee. She did not see me, however; she was fervently kissing a great bearded fellow in a brass-buttoned blue coat, which he had opened to wrap about them both, making a warm protected place for her in his arms. He looked up and saw me. His eyes, timid and kindly, widened, and he nodded in recognition.

"Kalugin," I acknowledged with brittle courtesy, tipping my hat. I edged on past them quickly, but not so quickly as to suggest I was fleeing. What had I to flee from? Not guilt, certainly. No gentleman dishonorably covets another gentleman's lady.

As I reached the aft saloon we felt it beginning, with the rising surge that lifted the *Thunderer* at its mooring and threatened to swamp the fleeing whaleboats; we heard the roar coming up from the earth, and in the City some mortals sat up in their beds and frowned at what they could sense but not quite hear yet.

I clung to the rail of the *Thunderer*. My fellow operatives were hurrying to the stern of the ship to be witness to History, and nearly every face bore an expression compounded of mingled horror and eagerness. There were one or two who turned away, averting their eyes. There were those like me, sick and exhausted, who merely stared.

And really, from where we lay offshore, there was not much to *see*; no DeMille spectacle; no more at first than a puff of dust rising into the air. But very clear across the water we heard the rumbling, and then the roar of bricks coming down, and steel snapping, and timbers groaning, and the high sweet shattering of glass, and the tolling in all discordance of bronze-throated bells. Loud as the Last Trumpet, but not loud enough to drown out the screams of the dying. No, the roar of the earthquake even paused for a space, as if to let us hear mortal agony more clearly; then the second shock came, and I saw a distant tower topple and fall slowly, and then the little we had been able to see of the City was concealed in a roiling fog the color of a bloodstain.

I turned away, and chanced to look up at the open doorway of a stateroom on the deck above. There stood Labienus, watching the death of three thousand mortals with an avid stare. That was when I *knew,* and knew beyond question, whose weapon I was.

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I hadn't escaped. My splendid mansion, with all its gilded conceits, had collapsed in a rain of bricks and broken plaster.

A hand settled on my shoulder and I dropped my gaze to behold Lewis, of all people, looking into my face with compassion.

"I know," he murmured, "I know, old fellow. Too much horror to bear. At least it's finished now, for those poor mortals and for us. At least we've done our jobs. Brace up! Can I get you a drink?"

What did he recognize in my sick white face? Not the features of a man who had emptied a phial into an innocent-looking cup of wine, and given it to him under pretense of calming his nerves. Why, I'd always been a poisoner, hadn't I? But it had happened long ago, and he had no memory of it anyway. I'd seen to that. And Lewis would never suspect me of such behavior in any case. We were both gentlemen, after all.

"No, thank you," I replied, "I believe I'll just take the air for a little while out here. It's a fine restorative to the nerves, you know. Sea air."

"So it is," he agreed, stepping back. "That's the spirit! And it's not as though you could have done anything more. You know what they say: History cannot be changed." He gave me a final helpful thump on the arm and moved away, clinging to the rail as the deck pitched.

Alone, I fixed my eyes on the wide horizon of the cold and perfect sea. I drew in a deep breath of chill air.

One can write lies. And live them.

Two operatives in uniform were making their way toward me through the press of the crowd. I looked across at them.

"Executive Facilitator Victor?"

I nodded. They shouldered into place, one on either side of me.

"Sir, your presence is urgently requested. Mr. Labienus sends his apologies for unavoidably revising your schedule," one of them recited.

"Certainly." I exhaled. "By all means, gentlemen, let us go."

We made our way across deck to the forward compartments, avoiding the hatches where the crew were busily loading down the Art, the Music, the Literature, the fine flowering of the Humanity that we had, after all, been created to save. ○

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

MOONSEED
by Stephen Baxter
HarperPrism, $21.00
ISBN: 0-06-105044-X

British SF writers have long had a particular flair for the World Disaster novel. Over the years, we've seen the world menaced by a variety of entertaining ends, ranging from an invasion of giant alien plants in John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* to inexorable mineralization of all living things in J.G. Ballard's *The Crys-tal World.* Depending on the temperament of the writer, the plot might resolve in the last-second rescue (as in the prototype for this subgenre, H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*). Or, as in major works by Olaf Stapledon or Arthur C. Clarke, it could depict the End of the World as just a passing phase in the larger history of the Universe.

It's a distinct pleasure to see Stephen Baxter, one of the most prominent younger British writers, turning to this vein for his big new novel, *Moonseed.* We begin in a very near future, just after the turn of the millennium.

The threat arrives in the form of a mineral specimen brought to Earth by one of the Apollo moon missions. Kept in strict quarantine in a NASA vault since its retrieval, the specimen is given for analysis to Henry Meacher, a disgruntled ex-NASA geologist and a rather obnoxious "ugly American." For political reasons, the rock is sent to Edinburgh, where Meacher's idealistic lab assistant releases a few precious bits of moondust (generated when pieces are sawed off the rock for analysis) on Ard Tor, the ancient volcanic cone that dominates the landscape of Edinburgh.

Unknown to any of them, of course, the specimen contains a sort of catalyst that attacks igneous rock. It begins to transform Ard Tor into an active volcano. The moonseed (as it is eventually dubbed) works slowly at first, so it takes some time for anyone to realize what is actually going on—but at that point, Meacher realizes that the process will inevitably contaminate all the igneous rock on Earth, causing planet-wide vulcanism and seismic disturbances on a scale unprecedented in human history. Suddenly, a lot of connections are made: the planet Venus has recently exploded, and its destruction also seems to have been caused by contamination from the moonseed. And with an eruption wreaking havoc in Edinburgh, the British face the worst disaster since World War II. Jane (to whom Meacher has become romantically attached) and her family are evacuated, but it is evident that the disaster cannot be contained.

By this point, Baxter's plot engine is in high gear. Meacher sets out (with the help of his ex-wife, a NASA astronaut) to convince the world powers that a return to the moon is the only way to determine the origins and nature of the moonseed—which evidently has been on the moon for billions of years without setting off the sort of destruction it has caused on Earth. Scientists speculate that the moonseed may be

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a sort of nanotech life form, converting planets into some alien space exploration device. Other lines of research suggest that its operation is on the most basic level of material, right down at the level of superstrings.

A series of disasters takes place. Baxter has obviously done his research on Mount St. Helens, Pompeii, Chernobyl, and other historical disasters. He spins out one catastrophe after another; the destruction of Edinburgh, with subsequent damage to nearby nuclear plants, is dwarfed by the mega-quake and tsunami following the breaking loose of a major subduction zone, and then by the eruption of a giant shield volcano—with a geologist on top of the growing cone to give an eyewitness close-up. Baxter is also very good at giving the reader a close-up of the high-tech world, from the inside of a NASA briefing, to an astronaut training session, to a F-14 bombing mission to take out a dam, flooding the moonseed-contaminated Grand Canyon.

But the moonseed infestation is, at bottom, an excuse for Baxter to launch a moon mission, sending Meacher to investigate the plague at its source. Baxter even has a few new twists to add to the by-now-familiar lunar expedition—instead of landing in a closed module, his explorers ride down in an open cockpit lander (there's no air drag to worry about) at near-orbital speeds. Baxter then raises the ante as the details of Meacher's plan to combat the moonseed become clear, and the direction in which the conclusion has to go becomes inevitable. Showing events from Meacher's perspective, rather than a trained astronaut's, adds to the effectiveness, and undercuts the "been there, done that" reaction many readers are likely to have to a story set on the moon.

Baxter's portrayal of the high-tech world and of natural phenomena on a grand scale is so convincing that it is somewhat disconcerting to see him flub details of America society, such as a character going to a Chinese restaurant for a sandwich, or having an excited Meacher exclaim "Shit hot!" (a completely new expression to this reviewer, a lifelong aficionado of foul-mouthed American speech). Some might begin to wonder whether the descriptions of Russian, Japanese, or even English society have similar miscues—or worse, whether Baxter's account of a Soyuz liftoff is really accurate, after all. This of course is the risk of setting a book in the near future. In the broader perspective, these slips are only minor detractions from the overall quality of the novel, but somewhere along the line, an editor should have caught them.

All quibbles aside, *Moonseed* is a powerful large-scale hard SF novel, with a big cast of characters, several interesting subplots, and a good sense of the social impact of technical and scientific discoveries. Baxter brings in an enormous amount of scientific material, and brings home its impact on ordinary people in one startling scene after another. Most impressive are the final fifty pages or so, where he pushes the implications of the moonseed to its logical conclusion—and beyond. The proportion of outright marvels in these final chapters is as great as in any SF novel I have read in recent years.

The publisher's blurb suggests that Baxter is the inheritor of the mantle of Clarke, Asimov, and Heinlein. A closer parallel might be *Lucifer's Hammer*, in which Niven and Pournelle showed a similar facility at capturing the human impact of worldshattering phenomena. That is hardly bad company to be in.

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SAILING TO SARANTIUM
by Guy Gavriel Kay
HarperPrism, $24.00
ISBN: 0-06-105117-9

Kay's latest, the first of a duology, "The Sarantine Mosaic," continues his fascination with creating modern fantasy from the history of the Mediterranean region. This has led him into territory little explored by other fantasists, as in *Tigana,* set in a quasi-Italy, or *A Song for Arbonne,* which drew on the Provence of the troubadour era. Here, as the title suggests, the model is Byzantium: specifically, during the sixth-century reign of Justinian I, one of the most fascinating eras in ancient history. Its appeal to writers is obvious—after all, this culture's very name is synonymous with political intrigue. (David Drake, S.N. Stirling, and Harry Turtledove, among others, have dipped into that period for material.)

The overall plot is largely concerned with Caius Crispus, or Crispin, a mosaic artist summoned from his home in the fallen Western Empire to work on the Emperor's new building project, a great domed religious edifice in the capital city, Sarantium. Unlike most of Kay's earlier novels, this one stays fairly tightly focused on its main character. After a prologue setting the political scene in Sarantium, the action is seen from Crispin's point of view for practically the entire first half of the book before moving to look at events from other characters' standpoints. (And for the most part, even these lead back to Crispin.) As a result, this is in some ways the tightest of Kay's novels. While there is undoubtedly important business to be settled in the second volume, this one feels as if it could stand on its own.

The title phrase becomes, quite explicitly, a metaphor for embarking on a new way of life—one involving risks and unforeseen changes. This theme runs throughout the novel. After a series of delays and mishaps, the message summoning a master mosaicist to the capital arrives in the west—where the artist to whom it is addressed capriciously gives a false name, and has the invitation given to Crispin. Because of the delays, Cris-pin must take a land route to Sarantium, instead of the usual sea voyage (adding an ironic dimension to the title). But by taking this route, he encounters people and beings who drastically alter his life—as he does theirs. And so the symbolism of the title becomes more significant.

As usual, Kay's secondary characters are well-drawn, and in many cases as interesting as the protagonist. In addition to Crispin, we get to know a young peasant woman whom he rescues from an untimely fate; a Sarantine captain who is a fanatical follower of chariot racing; a champion chariot driver; the young queen who sends Crispin to Sarantium on a secret mission; and the Emperor and Empress themselves, two charismatic figures with a hand on the strings of every player in the vast puppet show of Sarantine life.

Crispin's journey to Sarantium takes him from the remnants of the former empire—analogous to Rome—through deeply forested country where remnants of an even older culture still survive. His encounters with the Sarantine world, which grow more frequent as he approaches the heart of its power, are violent and upsetting. The most dangerous point in his journey is the end. Upon his arrival and formal presentation at the Emperor's court, he is thrown into the shark tank of court intrigue, forced to depend on his native wits to survive at all. Fittingly, his survival turns out to hinge on his decision to abjure all

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deception, and to declare his opinions openly to the emperor. This immediately earns him powerful enemies; but as we quickly learn, in Sarantium to exist at all is to have enemies.

Kay's "Mediterranean" fantasies have varied a good deal in the degree to which magic plays a role in the plot; here, that element is more prominent than it has been since *Tigana,* the first in the set. But as in all the previous books in the series, there is also a strong focus on the interplay between different religions and the worldviews they incorporate. Here, the major conflict is between the new state religion (a form of sun worship) and the old paganism, now dying out. Readers familiar with history will find close parallels here (as elsewhere in Kay's work) to the replacement of paganism by Christianity. In particular, Crispin is impelled to find a synthesis among three belief systems: those of the half-pagan barbarians who have conquered his native land, and whose religion borders on heresy from the point of view of the east; the more deeply pagan peasants of the wild country (equivalent to the Balkans) through which he travels, and where he has an epiphany; and those of the Sarantines, for whom minutely detailed religious controversy is a major participant sport. The balance appears, ultimately, in his art, expressed in the mosaic that he was called to Sarantium to create.

Perhaps the most consistent criticism of Kay's work has been a feeling that he is insufficiently diligent in "filing off the serial numbers" of the material he draws on—a criticism that seemed particularly acute in *Lions of Al-Rassan,* his "Spanish" fantasy. Here, certainly, his historical originals will be evident to anyone at all familiar with Byzantium. But Kay has turned them very much to his own uses. Rather than letting them dictate the shape of his novel, he has imposed his own larger structure upon them. The result is rich enough to send a reader back for a closer look at some of the earlier work in this "Mediterranean" setting, looking for previously unsuspected resonances. And it is more than enough to leave this reader waiting impatiently for the second volume of "The Sarantine Mosaic."

WHAT REMAINS TO BE DISCOVERED: The Future of Science
by Sir John Maddox
Free Press, $25.00
ISBN: 0-684-82292-X

Despite claims to the contrary, the work of science is far from complete. Maddox, a former editor of *Nature,* takes readers for a quick tour at the uncharted territory ahead.

Any honest attempt to deal with this subject—and Maddox is quite honest—has to recognize that in many cases we have no idea what questions the future will be trying to answer. Maddox illustrates this point in his introduction, deftly summarizing four centuries of scientific history to show how each new era explored problems its predecessors could not have foreseen. Very few nineteenth-century scientists would know what to make of quantum electrodynamics—one of the foundations of modern physics.

Maddox directs his inquiry toward three broad areas of science, under the headings Matter (i.e., Physics), Life (Biology), and Our World (a catchall). Skeptical of attempts to create a "theory of everything," Maddox thinks we are more likely to find ourselves with a "new Physics," growing from some breakthrough we cannot predict. Several of our unsolved puzzles may foreshadow this. Cosmologists will have

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to explain how the universe as a whole can be younger than some of its stars, unless some extremely sophisticated measurements of those ages are flat wrong. The true nature of quasars remains undiscovered, as does the nature and location of the "dark matter" theory demands to keep galaxies from flying apart.

At the other end of the scale, a complete theory of the building blocks of matter seems no closer now than it did a century ago, despite enormous progress. The Higgs boson, a subatomic particle the existence of which is vital to current theory, eludes detection. The mass (if any) of the neutrino remains a matter of controversy. And gravitation stubbornly resists explanation in terms of quantum theory. The solution to any one of these problems is likely to earn someone a Nobel Prize, and equally likely to form the basis for technologies we have no inkling of—just as quantum theory led to much of modern electronics.

In the life sciences, there is still no accepted explanation of how life originated from non-living materials. Nor, despite growing confidence that it must be so, is there definitive evidence of life beyond Earth. Even on our own planet, we are getting a constant string of surprises: the ocean depths turn out to have a startling variety of life nobody suspected just a few decades ago. Other new species, including some comparatively large mammals (possibly including a large Himalayan bear that may be the original upon which the Yeti story was built) keep walking out of the woods to surprise life scientists, despite the accelerating extinction rates.

The section titled Our World offers looks at the frontiers of other disciplines. Neuroscience has only recently decided that there may be a meaningful answer to the question, "What is consciousness?" Only now, the answer to that question is as likely to come from computer science as from research into human psychology. Mathematics has its own set of unsolved problems; we recently saw Fermat's Last Theorem cracked, a result that made headlines. Next may come solutions to such headbangers as the problem of in what order a salesman should visit several stops in order to minimize the travel distance. If string theory, which posits ten-dimensional space-time, becomes the next standard model of the universe, new math will undoubtedly be needed to make it work. Finally, but far from least, science may play its most important role in helping solve some of the calamities that are guaranteed to occur if the growth of industrial society—and the consequent booms in population and life span—continue unchecked.

Maddox places these and many other problems in the context of current science, giving a remarkably clear picture not just of the state of the art, but of the cutting edge—and plenty of food for speculation about what lies beyond it. Hard SF writers interested in new veins to mine for story material might find Maddox's explorations as useful as anything published within the covers of a single book since Clarke's *Profiles of the Future,* over thirty years ago.

THE SCI-FI CHANNEL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF TV SCIENCE FICTION
by Roger Fulton and John Betancourt
Warner Aspect, $15.00
ISBN: 0-446-57478-8

An expansion of a British reference published last year by Fulton, this hefty trade paperback offers a quick reference to a wide variety of SF and SF-related TV series. The latter category is pretty loosely defined—largely, any series (such as

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The Avengers) that had a significant fannish following is likely to be included. Fantasy, horror, and superhero shows share equal billing with those with themes of space travel or set in future societies, the usual defining criteria of science fiction. All major shows receive episode-by-episode coverage, including brief plot summaries, lists of guest actors, and director credits.

The authors contend that this is the Golden Age of SF on TV, and it is hard to argue with that judgment. Certainly, on the evidence of this book, today's viewers have an unprecedented selection of new SF TV shows to choose from, as well as a healthy sample of the best of the past in reruns at any given time. The Sci-Fi Channel has undoubtedly done its part to make this feast of media SF available to watchers.

The book's coverage is remarkably full. Almost any TV show with significant fantastic or SFnal content is covered somewhere in these pages. Even the very earliest generation of TV SF gets a look, although there is understandably considerably less detail on *Captain Video* or *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet* than on *Star Trek* or even *Blake's Seven*. Naturally, British shows are given plenty of space. The book's coverage often extends to episodes of series, both familiar and obscure, that never reached the air. There is also a short concluding section on forty-one really obscure shows—*Bliss, Kinvig*, and *Torch* among them—that even the most fanatical viewers may never have heard of.

Many readers judge a reference book by its errors and omissions, which are of course impossible to escape in any undertaking of this sort. TV trivia buffs will undoubtedly find enough here to keep them feeling superior. On the other hand, the amount of useful information more than justifies the modest price of the book. To judge by the amount of discussion any of the currently popular series can set off among a group of fans, the probable audience for this book is enormous, and readers will undoubtedly be pulling it off the shelf to settle thousands of arguments before the authors have even begun gathering material for the next edition.

The only significant category Fulton and Betancourt leave uncovered is animation. It could be argued that some of the best SF on TV has been done in animated form, and that *The Jetsons, Pinky and the Brain,* or the huge body of Japanese anime are more worthy of inclusion here than such routine fodder as *Battlestar Galactica*. Still, given that there is an enormous amount of such material—including thousands of hours of mediocre and derivative cartoons that have long been the standard fare for Saturday mornings—the decision to omit animation is understandable. On the other hand, the increasing sophistication of computer graphics is likely to make such a distinction harder and harder to maintain over the long run.

In short, this is a book every TV-watching SF fan will want to have handy, whether to refresh the memory as to which episode of *Buffy* involved a class trip to the zoo, or to settle a bet about which actor played Number Two in the chess episode of *The Prisoner*—or to find something interesting to watch on an even`c ing when none of the familiar shows are on. ❍

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SF Conventional Calendar

Don't miss the big Easter cons, followed by I-Con (biggest on the East Coast). Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

MARCH 1999

25-28—**AggieCon.** For info, write: **MSC Student Programs, Box J-1, College Station TX 77840.** Or phone: **(409) 845-1515** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: College Station TX (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Texas A & M Student Center. Guests will include: Nigel Bennett, Joe R. Lansdale, Brian Stelfreeze, P. N. Elrod.

26-28—**MidSouthCon. (901) 274-7355.** Sheraton 4 Points, Memphis TN. J. P. Hogan, Joy Marie Ledet, Cullen Johnson.

26-28—**WillyCon. (E-mail) scifict@wscgate.wsc.edu.** Wayne State College, Wayne NE. Jack McDevitt, Hap Henriksen.

26-28—**FilkOntario. (E-mail) hayman@bserv.com.** Toronto ON. Urban Tapestry, Don Neill. SF/fantasy folksinging.

26-28—**Gdansk SF Film Seminar. (058) 553-1073.** U. of Gdansk, Poland. 3 scientific sessions, illustrated by films.

APRIL 1999

1-4—**NorwesCon. (206) 270-7850.** Airport Doubletree, Seattle WA. Turtledove, Hescox, Horner. "Alternate Realities."

1-4—**SwanCon. (E-mail) ackerman@multiline.com.au.** Metro Inn, S. Perth Australia. Dann, Wurts, Maitz, Webb, Kidd.

1-4—**ConFurence. (714) 530-4993.** Town & Country, San Diego CA. McQuillin, Hanson-Roberts. Anthropomorphics.

2-4—**BaltiCon. (410) 563-2737.** Omni, Baltimore MD. David Weber, artist Jennifer E. Weyland.

2-4—**MiniCon. (612) 824-5559.** Hilton, Minneapolis MN. Octavia Butler, Mark & Priscilla Olson, David Nee.

2-5—**UK National Con.** Britannia Hotel, Bristol England. Peter Beagle, John Clute, Jeff Noon, Tom Holt, Ron Tiner.

2-5—**New Zealand Nat'l. Con. (Web) http://www.conquest.sf.org.nz/.** Auckland New Zealand. Tom Baker, A. D. Foster.

9-11—**I-Con, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. (516) 632-6045.** State U. of NY. H. Ellison, L. M. Bujold, Hogan, Wessels.

9-11—**5Con, 8 Green St., Box 7950, Northampton MA 01063. (E-mail) alshaw@sophia.smith.com.** Seelye Hall.

16-18—**To Be CONtinued, Box 11231, South Bend IN 46634. (219) 272-7499.** Ramada. Reichert, R. Wood, McDonald.

16-18—**EerieCon, Box 412, Buffalo NY 14226.** Fallsview Resort, Niagara Falls NY. Brian Lumley, Josepha Sherman.

16-18—**GalactiCon, 6636 Shallowford Rd., Chattanooga TN 37421. (423) 344-9465.** Ramada So. Moon, Weber, Suttons.

23-25—**BAKA!-Con, Box 44976, Tacoma WA 98444. (253) 535-2395.** Doubletree, Seattle WA. Anime.

23-25—**AnimeCentral, 119 S. Emerson St. #231, Mt. Prospect IL 60056.** Ramada, Rosemont (Chicago) IL. DeJesus.

24-25—**Creation, 100 W. Broadway #1200, Glendale CA 91210. (818) 409-0960.** Pasadena CA. Commercial Star Trek.

30-May 2—**DemiCon, Box 7572, Des Moines IA 50322. (512) 262-6814. (E-Mail) roth@netins.net.** Robinsons, Effinger.

30-May 2—**Corflu, 627 Barton Ave., Springfield FL 32404. (850) 763-0255.** Sandpiper, Panama City FL. Fanzine fans.

30-May 2—**Federation Con, Schissierstr. 4, Augsburg 86154, Germany. (49 821) 219-1937.** Maritim, Bonn. Jeri Ryan.

30-May 2—**Malice Domestic, Box 31137, Bethesda MD 20824. Renaissance, Washington DC.** M. Clark. Mystery fiction.

MAY 1999

1-2—**Nebula Awards Weekend, 7601 Bathurst St. #617, Thornhill ON L4J 4H5. (E-mail) info@sfwa.org.** Pittsburgh PA.

AUGUST 1999

26-29—**Conucopia, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. Anaheim CA. Pournelle.** The North American SF Con (NASFiC). $100.

SEPTEMBER 1999

2-6—**AussieCon 3, Box 688, Prospect Heights IL 60070.** Melbourne, Australia. Gregory Benford. The WorldCon. US$155.

AUGUST 2000

31-Sep. 4—**ChiCon 2000, Box 642057, Chicago IL 60664.** Bova, Eggleton, Baen, Turtledove, Passovoy. WorldCon. $140.

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NEXT ISSUE

JUNE LEAD STORY

Hot new writer **David Marusek**, whose novella "We Were Out of Our Minds with Joy" was one of the most popular and talked-about stories of 1995, returns to take us deep into a strange high-tech future where the border between what's real and what's not real has grown disturbingly thin, with a compassionate, vivid, and powerful look into "The Wedding Album"—the contents of which you won't soon forget. This pyrotechnic and brilliant novella is likely to be one of the most talked-about stories of 1999, and may well turn up on this year's award ballots, so don't miss it!

TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Hugo and Nebula Award-winner **Kim Stanley Robinson**, the author of the bestselling "Mars" trilogy—*Red Mars, Green Mars,* and *Blue Mars*—returns to these pages after a long absence, and returns to the Red Planet as well, for a disquieting study of "Sexual Dimorphism" on a terraformed future Mars; Hugo-winner **James Patrick Kelly**, one of our most popular authors, tells us the story of a young boy faced with some very tough choices, the sort that turn a boy into a man—and which could also spell the doom of all life on Earth, if he chooses wrong, in the compelling "10^{16} to 1"; **William Sanders**, whose popular story "The Undiscovered" was on both Hugo and Nebula Final Ballots last year, takes us on a suspenseful trip back through time with some "Dirty Little Cowards"; new Australian writer **Chris Lawson** makes a brilliant *Asimov's* debut with an incisive look at how high-tech bioscience may someday allow Faith itself to be "Written in Blood," with unexpected results; acclaimed writer and critic **Gregory Feeley** lets us eavesdrop on a correspondence whose participants are millions of miles apart, and growing further apart every day, in more ways than one, in a glimpse of "Ladies in Their Letters"; and new writer **Cory Doctorow** returns with an invitation to "Visit the Sins," an invitation which, if you accept it, will take you to some hidden places of the heart and mind.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column muses about how "The More Things Change . . ."; and **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our June 1999 issue on sale on your newsstand on May 4, 1999, or subscribe today (you can now also subscribe electronically, online, at our new Asimov's Internet website, at **http://www.asimovs.com**), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you in 1999!

COMING SOON

great new stories by **Michael Swanwick, Robert Reed, Kim Stanley Robinson, Geoffrey A. Landis, Esther M. Friesner, Alastair Reynolds, Walter Jon Williams, Kage Baker, Brian Stableford, Eliot Fintushel, Jane Yolen, Tom Purdom, Andy Duncan,** and many others.

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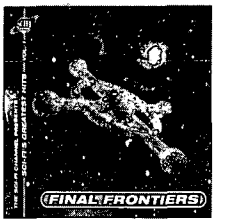
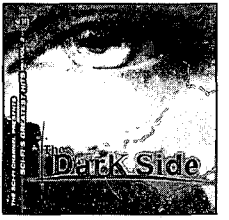
Hot Pick!

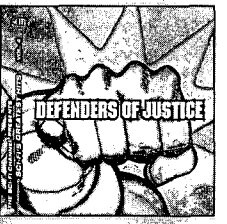
From other-worldly adventures...





to the darkest corners...

and from alien encounters...



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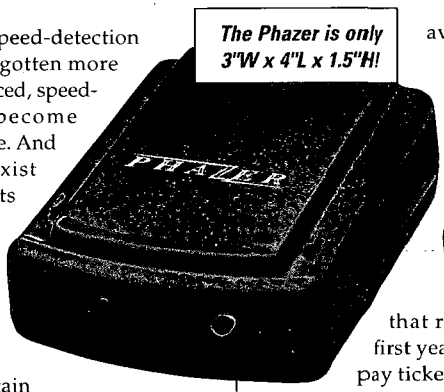
How to make your car invisible to radar and laser

Rocky Mountain Radar introduces a device guaranteed to make your car electronically "invisible" to speed traps—if you get a ticket while using the product, the manufacturer will pay your fine!

It seems that as speed-detection technology has gotten more and more advanced, speeding tickets have become virtually unavoidable. And although devices exist that enable motorists to detect these speed traps, they are outlawed in many states...including mine.



The solution. Today, Rocky Mountain Radar offers drivers like me a perfect solution—the Phazer. The Phazer makes your automobile electronically "invisible" to police speed-detecting equipment. The radar component works by mixing an X, K or Ka radar signal with an FM "chirp" and bouncing it back at the squad car by way of a waveguide antenna, effectively confusing the computer inside the radar gun. The laser component transmits an infrared beam that has the same effect on laser Lidar units.

Perfectly legal. Some radar devices have been outlawed because they *transmit* scrambling radar beams back to the waiting law enforcement vehicle. The Phazer, however, *reflects* a portion of the signal plus an added FM signal back to the police car. Unless you are a resident of California, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Virginia or Washington, D.C., using the Phazer is completely within your legal rights.

Encourage responsible driving. While the Phazer *is* designed to help you (and me) avoid speed traps, it *is not* intended to condone excessive speeding. For that reason, within the first year, the manufacturer will pay tickets where the speed limit was not exceeded by more than 30%, or 15 miles per hour, whichever is less.

Double protection. If you prefer to be *notified* when you are in range of a police radar, the Phantom is for you. The Phantom combines the Phazer with a radar detector. It's legal in every state except California, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Virginia and Washington, D.C. Ask your representative for more details!

Risk-free. The Phazer and Phantom are both backed by our risk-free trial and three-year manufacturer's warranty. Try them, and if you're not satisfied, return your purchase within 90 days for a "No Questions Asked" refund.

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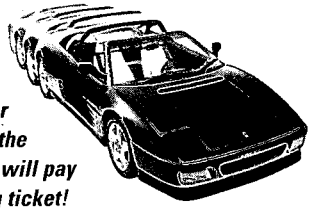

The Phazer makes your car invisible to police radar and lasers or the manufacturer will pay your speeding ticket!

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